

HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

10.
DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD **RHAPSODY**

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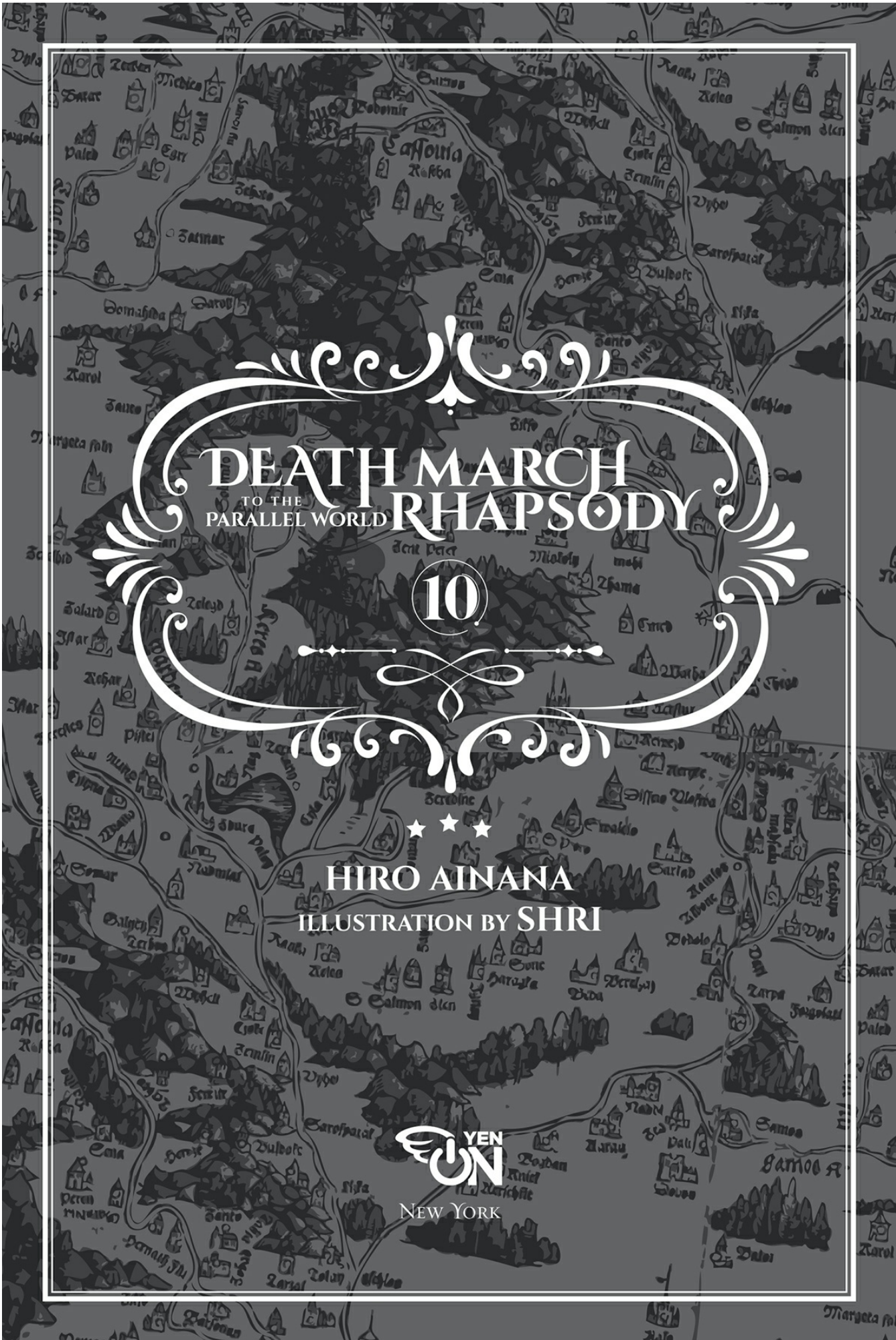
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10

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ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 10

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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Satou here. When I traveled to a new country, I always looked up information on the Internet beforehand. In this parallel world, the main source of information is hearsay, so it's not entirely reliable, but that can be interesting in its own way.

"We're almost at Labyrinth City, right?"

"Almost there," I responded as Arisa fidgeted and fiddled with her fluffy lilac hair.

Everyone else in the carriage seemed just as eager as she was.

"Mm. Excited."

Mia, who'd been gazing out the window and humming a tune, looked at me with a happy expression on her youthful features. As she turned her head, her light-blue pigtails fluttered in the air, exposing her slightly pointed elf ears.

"Swishy..."

Mia's hair whipped around in the crowded carriage, but the white-haired, cat-eared Tama easily avoided it. She was wearing leather armor over her pink outfit.

"Ouchie, sir."

The stray pigtail hit the brunette, dog-eared Pochi instead, who gave an exaggerated whine. Her outfit matched Tama's, although it was a different color.

"Sorry."

"No problem at all, sir!"

Pochi smiled at the apologetic Mia.

"Master?"

I heard Lulu call for me, so I opened the hatch to peek out onto the coachman's stand.

As she turned to look at me, her beautiful black hair swayed under her veil,

capturing my attention. If I didn't have feelings for someone else already, and if she wasn't a middle school-aged child, I would have fallen for her in a second.

The residents of this world have no taste whatsoever if they think this lovely young lady is unattractive.

Lulu wore a veil, not to hide her face but to protect her hair and skin from the sun and dust.

"There is a caravan stopped up ahead, I report."

This monotone statement came from Nana, straight-faced as always. Though she appears to be a busty beauty, she's actually a homunculus who is less than a year old.

She was riding on a runosaur, a creature similar to a raptor, which made for all kinds of rhythmic bouncing.

"Would you like Nana and me to go on ahead and investigate?"

Riding another runosaur on the opposite side of the carriage was Liza of the orangescale tribe, looking gallant as she confidently held the reins.

Aside from her reptilian tail and the orange scales around her neck, wrists, and so on, she didn't look much different from a normal human.

"Wait a second."

I opened the map, investigating this so-called caravan.

It was a group of around thirty people, their bags being carried on pack animals called "dulldeer."

The person in charge was...a princess?

The princess of a small nation called the Nolork Kingdom was riding in the carriage in the middle, and the people leading the dulldeer were not merchants but Nolork Kingdom soldiers. They must be guarding the princess as well.

There was one knight and one squire, both riding on mounts called "greathorn deer."

The carriages, meanwhile, were being pulled by creatures the size of young elephants called "mammoth littlehorn deer."

“...Looks like that’s the princess of the Nolork Kingdom and company.”

“Huh. All the way from the edge of the west? Could it be a bridal procession?”

Arisa peeked out curiously.

From what she told me later, Nolork was located near the center of the continent with a bunch of other small nations; to the west was a large, inhospitable desert, hence the phrase *edge of the west*.

Nolork was even farther north than the Eluette Marquisate, which was just north of Labyrinth City.

Mia shook her head. “Explorers.”

“I doubt it. Those small kingdoms would never let a young woman move up in the world.”

Arisa was a former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom, where she’d been unable to get a tutor because it was “unnecessary” for her to learn and had to study language herself.

“But Lalakie was ruled by a queen, so I guess it really depends on the location and era, even in this world.”

I remembered the events that occurred not long ago on the sugar route in the southern seas.

It seemed like just yesterday that we had rescued Rei, an amnesiac, in the Seadragon Islands and traveled around the tropics.

The journey came with lots of tasty memories, like fresh tropical fruit, candy made in a sugar factory, and the rum I drank in a bar with sailors, but the tuna was definitely at the top of the list.

The *ootoro* from a freshly caught giant tuna. Just remembering that melt-in-your-mouth goodness practically made me drool.

Oh, and we also foiled the Skeleton King’s plans to resurrect Rei’s home, the floating island of Lalakie, and take over the world.

I really wanted to take Rei and her adopted sister, Yuuneia, along with us, but being around labyrinths or large crowds of people would be harmful to Rei’s

health, so they stayed in the southern islands.

Of course, once we were settled in Labyrinth City, I planned to visit them while on the way to see Miss Aaze in the elf village.

Still, I talked to friends like Miss Aaze and Rei with the Space Magic spell Telephone almost every day, so it never felt like they were far away.

The grains of sand in the wind brought me back from my reminiscing.

“Must be wind from the desert.”

“A desert?” Lulu asked.

“Yes, there’s a large desert past the ridge you can see beyond Labyrinth City.”

Spiky plants called “veria,” which looked like aloe or cacti, grew sparsely on either side of the narrow road our carriage was traveling.

Veria grew throughout the basin containing Labyrinth City; in the area around the ridge beyond it, there were plant monsters called evil veria, which looked like giant flora.

According to my map, a large amount of barrier posts had been set up around the city to prevent the Evil Veria from invading.

“Ohhh, so that’s why the air seems so dry.”

“Mm. Not enough moisture.”

I brushed some of the sand from Arisa’s and Mia’s hair, then turned my eyes away from the veria back toward the path ahead of us.

Beyond the princess’s party, the tall, thick walls of Labyrinth City left a powerful impression, with giant, stone-faced statues standing imposingly on either side of the gate.

“Meeew?”

“Wow, sir.”

Tama and Pochi peeked out from inside the carriage.

“Giaaants?”

“So big, sir!”

The pair pointed at the seated stone statues.

Even though they were sitting, their heads were still on level with the thirty-foot-tall wall.

“Those are stone golems, I report.”

“They look quite strong. I do not know if even my Magic Spear would work. I think the best way would be to hit them with magic first, then...”

Hearing Nana’s remark, Liza naturally started forming a strategy.

In my vision, they were displayed as **Stone Giants**. They were level 43, so they must be the guardians of Celivera.

Although I wasn’t sure why they were on the opposite side from the labyrinth.

“Oh man, now it really feels real! Soon I’ll make my debut as an adventurer!”

Arisa leaned into the wind, visibly shaking.

She must have been trembling with excitement.

“Satou.”

Mia tugged on my arm.

“It’s a big silver coin, sir.”

“Medaaal?”

Mia had produced a silver medallion with a thin metal chain from her Fairy Pack.

The AR display said it was a **Key to the Ivy Manor**.

“From Gillil.”

Gillil was the house fairy who was in charge of Trazayuya’s research lab in the Bolenan Forest.

Trazayuya was Mia’s grandfather on her mother’s side and was said to be one of the wisest of the elves.

“What kind of medal is that?”

“Mm, certification medallion.”

When I had drunk dragonspring liquor with Gillil, I think he said that he had lived in Labyrinth City as Trazayuya's assistant.

"Is this maybe the key to the house where the elves lived when they were staying in Labyrinth City?"

"Mm."

Mia nodded confirmation to my theory.

"Wow, so it's a key? It's almost like a magic tool. There are even Elvish letters on the back."

When we were staying in the elf village, Arisa had learned how to read some Elvish.

As usual, she was devoted to her appetite for knowledge.

"Let's seeeee... Well, this one means 'magic.' The next one might be 'flow'?"

Murmuring to herself, Arisa casually channeled some magic into the medal.

"...Ah!" Mia stretched out her hand in alarm.

"Hmm? Should I not have done that?"

Arisa quickly stopped the flow of her magic, but from the sound of things, it was a little too late.

"Aaaaaagh!"

"The statues of Celivera are moving!"

"R-run awaaaaay!"

"We'll be cruuuushed!"

Up ahead, the people of the Nolork Kingdom started screaming.

Beyond them, the two golems sitting on either side of the gate started to move and began walking in our direction.

"Master, this looks bad!" Lulu cried from the coachman's stand.

She was probably referring to the golems, but there was another problem even before that.

The Nolork Kingdom dulldeer all took off running into the veria-dotted wasteland, dragging the soldiers along with them.

The mammoth littlehorn deer, too, turned to run away so quickly that they were knocking over their carriages.

The knight and squire had managed to keep their greathorn deer under control somehow.

Meanwhile, the golems took to one knee and bowed humbly.

“Look! Nurse! The guardians of Celivera have come to welcome us, no?”

“Be careful, Princess.”

A young girl stood near one of the fallen carriages, pointing at the golems excitedly.

She was standing on top of a quilt, suggesting that she had been taking a break outside the carriage.

Fortunately, it didn’t look like anyone had gotten caught up in the crashing carriages.

“<Master, we have been awaiting your arrival.>”

“<Master, we celebrate your return.>”

Two voices speaking Elvish were coming from the medallion Arisa was holding.

“Did this cause that, by any chance?”

“Mm. Gimme.”

As Arisa peered out cautiously from behind me, Mia nodded.

Accepting the medallion from Arisa, she held it up toward the golems.

“<I speak for thy master. We appreciate thy greetings deeply. However, thy duties are of utmost import, so ye must make haste to return to thy posts.>”

“<Understood.>”

“<Understood.>”

Mia spoke into the medallion in Elvish, and the golems went back to their

seated positions.

“Thank you, Mia.”

“Mm.”

There was small writing on the back of the medallion.

Mia must have been reading that to them.

“Sorry for being so careless.”

“Just read the instructions first next time.”

With that admonition to Arisa, I got down from the cart.

The Nolork Kingdom people were still panicking even now that the golems had returned to their seats; I had to try to calm them down.

At the very least, I had to offer to heal their wounded and let them borrow a carriage if theirs were beyond repair.



“Oh-ho? It doth lack aplomb, but this is quite a refined and well-made cart, no?”

Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom seemed quite impressed as she looked around the inside of our carriage.

She had large, expressive eyes, which made it entertaining to watch her constantly changing face.

She looked to be around the same age as Arisa, but she was actually fourteen, the same age as Lulu. In addition to her childlike face, her brown hair being tied into two short, curly pigtails probably contributed to her youthful air.

It was hard to believe she was only a year younger than my official age in this world.

Our carriage set off with the princess as well as her elderly nursemaid.

That put us over our usual capacity, so Tama and Pochi were riding with Liza and Nana on the runosaurs.

It was still a little cramped inside, so I moved out to the coachman’s stand,

too.

The knight and the squire girl rode on either side of us as guards.

“Thank you for your assistance, sir! I am Ravna, knight of the Nolork Kingdom!”

The knight took off her helmet, introducing herself so loudly that I winced a little.

I was surprised to see that she was a woman. Her appearance bore little resemblance to what most people might picture at the words *lady knight*. Instead, she was chiseled and handsome, and she seemed very dependable.

I had no doubt that the king and queen of Nolork relied on her quite a bit.

Despite her mature appearance, she was still rather young at twenty-four.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Ravna. I am Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight of the Muno Barony in the Shiga Kingdom.”

I introduced myself as politely as possible.

The squire quietly introduced herself as Ryula; she was a plain, soldierlike young woman.

“This is quite a comfortable carriage, no?”

“It certainly is, Princess. This must be the technology of a large kingdom.”

Inside the carriage, I could hear Princess Meetia and her nursemaid praising my carriage.

I had turned off the low-capacity skypower engine that reduced the vibration in the carriage to zero, but I guess just the basic suspension and the handmade cushions were enough to make it suitably luxurious.

“Are you here to become an explorer, too, Princess?” Arisa asked politely.

She was wearing a blond wig to conceal her purple hair since most people saw the latter as bad luck.

“That is—”

“Princess.”

“...Yes, thou need not remind me. I jest, of course. We have come to cure the viceroy’s daughter of her ailment.”

Curious about Princess Meetia’s words, I checked her information on the map and found that she had the title **Priestess of Heraluon** and the gift **Breath of Purification**.

She was only level 4, and she didn’t have Holy Magic or the “Oracle” skill, just skills like “Etiquette.”

Looking on the map, I saw that the viceroy’s fourth daughter was suffering from **Goblin Disease [Chronic]** and **Miasma Poisoning [Chronic]**.

The latter was displayed in gray; as many as 20 percent of Labyrinth City’s population suffered from it, albeit in varying degrees of severity.

Looked like it was the right call not to bring the half ghost Rei, since she was weak to miasma.

If the miasma was so thick that it was affecting the general populace, she would have definitely had a hard time here.

The Goblin Disease seemed to be much rarer, with only a handful of noble children carrying it.

“Are you already a doctor at your age, Princess?”

“No, but I do bear the divine protection of Heraluon. I can simply breathe upon the ill and make them well. Impressive, no?”

The princess’s Breath of Purification gift seemed to be a pretty useful one.

As time went on, I noticed that most of the conversation I could hear inside the carriage seemed to be between Arisa and the princess; Mia wasn’t joining in at all.

“Thy young lass is a quiet one, no?”

“Yes, Mia is rather shy, you see.”

“Am not,” Mia mumbled at last.

“Ah, so finally thou shall look upon me, n— What’s this?!”

The princess’s sudden change in tone sounded strange, so I opened the hatch

and peered inside.

“Why, thou art an elf, no?! Please forgive my rudeness. I am the sixth princess of the Nolork Kingdom, Meetia Nolork.”

“I am the youngest elf of Bolenan Forest, Misanaria Bolenan, daughter of Lamisauya and Lilinatoa.”

The princess bowed in the cramped carriage, and Mia nodded in appreciation.

I’d forgotten that she tended to be cold toward people who didn’t introduce themselves properly.

“Bolenan! Then thou must be kin to the sage Lord Trazayuya, no?!”

“Sage?”

Mia looked flummoxed by the excitable princess.

“Surely, then, you will be traveling to the Ivy Manor built by the sage himself, no?”

“Mrrr...”

Mia hesitated.



“Our master is the one who decides where we will stay, so we aren’t yet sure whether we will be going to this Ivy Manor,” Arisa responded.

“I suppose I have heard that only elves can reach the gates of the Ivy Manor, no?”

The princess seemed to know a lot about Labyrinth City.

I tried searching the map, but I didn’t see any building called the Ivy Manor there.

Maybe it was destroyed sometime after Gillil left the city, or maybe it was hidden. My money was on the latter.

“Have you been to Labyrinth City before, Princess?”

“No, this is my first time leaving my kingdom. I learned much about Labyrinth City from my elder brother, who trained there for a time.”

According to Princess Meetia, the people of the Nolork Kingdom periodically visited Celivera to procure Nolork thorns—an ingredient in monster repellent—and often trained in the labyrinth before returning.

There was a recipe for monster repellent using Nolork thorns in one of my books, too.

According to the book’s explanation, repellent made with this particular recipe was cheaper and longer lasting than other varieties.

As I was listening to this conversation, we arrived at the gates of Labyrinth City.

A large crowd of curious spectators was causing a fuss, probably because the giant golems had suddenly moved not long ago.

Nonetheless, we were able to complete the entry process and pass through the gates without too much trouble.

“Where might you be headed?”

The viceroy’s official residence, which doubled as a government office, was on the left side of the large plaza beyond the gate. To the right was the explorers’ guild. About three hundred feet along the main road straight ahead was the

viceroys personal dwelling, a palace surrounded by ramparts.

According to my map, the castle-like building visible to the southwest was the garrison of the labyrinth army.

“I was informed that the viceroy would prepare a room for us in his guesthouse, but it would be rude to barge in without a prior introduction. We should go to the office and make our arrival known before we visit.”

With that, the stiff knight guided her horse to the left.

We parked our carriage outside the entrance to the government office, and I accompanied the knight inside.

I was here to deliver a letter in addition to escorting her.

Rayleigh, the viceroy's second son who we'd rescued when he was adrift at sea, had written me a letter of introduction to his father, and I had written my own greeting note as well.

Normally it would be rude for a viceroy not to greet a visiting noble, but he and his wife were currently away from Celivera, which was why I wrote a greeting.

According to Rayleigh, the substitute viceroy was a particularly high-class noble of great prestige and power from the royal capital.

Rayleigh's younger siblings lived in Labyrinth City, while his elder siblings lived in the old capital.

“Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom, you say?”

A middle-aged clerk looked at the knight with growing confusion.

The female knight nodded shortly, looking disgruntled.

“Please wait a moment while we ready a reception room.”

The clerk sent an aide to prepare a room while he looked over a schedule.

“...I'm afraid her name isn't on this list. Please go confirm with Acting Viceroy Sokell.”

“Sir Sokell has not come to the office yet...”

“Again?! The viceroy and his wife cannot come back soon enough... I’m sure Sokell’s at a brothel. Bring him back even if it’s on a leash!”

As the clerk scowled, I overheard his hissed orders to his subordinate with my “Keen Hearing” skill.

From the sound of things, this Sokell fellow wasn’t doing his job, so they weren’t yet prepared to receive Princess Meetia.

After a short while, a staff member came to announce that the reception room was ready.

“We’ll take our leave here, then.”

Since we’d brought Princess Meetia where she needed to go, I figured my party could be on our way now.

“What? Thou art already leaving, Sir Satou? I still wish to speak more with Arisa and Lady Misanaria.”

“Princess, you must not trouble them too much,” the nursemaid gently scolded.

“Princess Meetia, you are staying in Labyrinth City as well, correct? In that case, we can meet again anytime. Once we have found a place to stay, we’ll be sure to contact you.”

After Princess Meetia reluctantly went on her way to the reception room with her entourage, we headed to the ticket window to speak with an official.

Noticing me, the middle-aged clerk sprinted outside.

“Has the princess been offended in some way?”

“No, no, I am simply here to deliver a letter for the viceroy.”

As I reassured the clerk, I pulled a sealed, cloth-wrapped package from my breast pocket. It contained my letter of greeting and the letter from the viceroy’s second son, Rayleigh.

The clerk was carefully polite as he accepted the letters and placed them on a delicately crafted tray.

Then, suddenly, his shoulders twitched.

“...Dalton, is this youngster the reason you dragged me in here on my day off?”

An overbearing voice behind me caused me to turn around.

There stood a young man of around twenty, his handsome face twisted with displeasure as he looked at me appraisingly.

It was the acting viceroy, Sokell.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. I am Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight of the Muno Barony.”

“What, a mere hereditary knight? I expected a noble from some paltry kingdom, but—” Sokell suddenly froze mid-glare. “—P-Pendragon, you say?!”

His expression of distaste vanished, replaced by one of deep hatred.

I had never met this man before, so why was he looking at me like I killed one of his parents?

“The traitorous scum who curried favor with a hero and made a mockery of His Highness?!”

“There seems to be some kind of misunderstanding...”

The only person I’d met whom a Shiga Kingdom noble would refer to as “His Highness” was probably Prince Sharorik, who I had encountered in the old capital.

“It’s because of you that His Highness lost the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis and his position with the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga!”

Sorry, what? It’d be one thing if he was blaming my alias, Nanashi the Hero, but as Satou, I’d hardly had any contact with the prince at all.

And while Claidheamh Soluis was indeed in my Storage, the official story was that the imitation I’d returned to the kingdom was the real thing.

By “lost,” he probably meant that it had been taken out of the prince’s hands.

I’d heard that because the prince had been magically aged in the yellow demon incident in the old capital, he’d been sent home to the royal capital to rest and heal up, but I didn’t know he’d lost his status as one of the Eight

Swordsmen of Shiga.

“My apologies, but I don’t know what you’re referring to. I have had the honor of speaking with His Highness twice, once at the banquet in the old capital and once at the Tenion Temple, but I do not believe I’ve interacted with him otherwise.”

Although I did seem to remember him acting as though I’d offended him both times.

“Making excuses, eh?! You lousy— Is this a letter? First you smooth talk the hero; now you come after the viceroy?!”

In the middle of his tirade, Sokell grabbed my letters from the middle-aged clerk’s tray, waving them around angrily.

The clerk and the other officials all grimaced at his rudeness.

My letter was one thing, but I would prefer that he stop crushing the one from Rayleigh to the viceroy.

“Excuse me, that letter is—”

I was about to state that it was from the viceroy’s son, but then a third party intervened.

“That is quite enough, *indeed*.”

A plump, mild-mannered old noble appeared, speaking in a strange manner.

He seemed to favor the color emerald green: His clothes, accessories, and even the items he carried were all the same shade. Impressively, he even wore green lipstick and nail polish.

According to the AR, he was the former count of an esteemed family living in Celivera.

His strange way of ending sentences was a bit familiar, so I checked his race and status, but he seemed to be a perfectly normal, non-possessed human. It was probably rude of me to suspect him of being a demon just because he said “indeed” a lot.

“Counselor Poputema!”

The middle-aged clerk looked relieved to see the green-clad noble.

Sokell, on the other hand, scowled, evidently not a fan of the man.

“You mustn’t handle a letter like that so savagely, indeed.”

The noble extracted the letter from Sokell’s hands.

“Fear not—I will be sure to convey this to the viceroy, indeed.”

“Thank you very much.”

It seemed to me that Counselor Poputema’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, but it didn’t really matter to me as long as Rayleigh’s letter reached his parents, so I simply bowed in thanks.

“Hmph. I’ve had quite enough of this.”

Sick of being ignored, Sokell rushed off to the reception room in a huff.

I was a little worried about Princess Meetia having to deal with this man, but she had her stern lady knight and nursemaid with her. I expected she’d be fine.

I apologized to the counselor and the other officials for the ruckus and excused myself.

Still, who would appoint someone as rude and short-tempered as Sokell to be acting viceroy? *Sorry, Rayleigh, but I don’t think your father, Marquis Ashinen, is a very capable statesman.*

At this rate, I was a little worried about our stay in Labyrinth City.



“Hey, we should go to the guild first and sign up to be adventurers!”

As soon as we left the office and got back into the carriage, Arisa was bouncing around excitedly.

Shouldn’t we find an inn before that?

Besides, it’s “explorers,” not “adventurers.”

“And then, and then! We’ll start off as F-rank adventurers! And then some nasty mid-level adventurers will be all ‘this ain’t a job for little girlies, got it?’ and then we’ll smack them down on the spot!”

I don't think anyone's going to say something like that to a noble, you know.

And why rank F?

The Roman alphabet did seem to exist here thanks to heroes and reincarnations of the past, but it seemed so obscure that I doubted they'd use it for ranks.

"And then, once we've got everyone's attention, we'll go into the labyrinth and get results no one would ever expect from a bunch of newbies, and it'll freak out the reception lady."

Why would we want to freak anyone out?

"Then there'll be a part from a super-rare monster in our spoils or something, and we'll get called to the guildmaster's office, and they'll promote us to C rank or B rank all in one go!"

Arisa was breathing so heavily as she finished her little fantasy that the younger group all gave her a round of applause.

Lulu giggled. "Master, shall I take us to the explorers' guild?"

"Sure, please do."

Before long, our carriage was parked behind the explorers' guild near the viceroy's dwelling.

There was a fairly large parking area, and one of the guild staff guided us to an empty space.

A cute little girl, maybe the staff member's daughter, was tending to the horses.

"I'm going in!" Arisa shouted as she dashed to the entrance, followed closely by Pochi, Tama, and Mia.

"Waaait?"

"Wait up, sir!"

"No fair."

Per my instructions, Liza and Nana handed over the reins of their runosaurs so that they could go keep an eye on the younger group.

Looking around, I saw that most of the other carriages still had their coachmen with them, so I approached the little kid by the horses.

“Excuse me, I’m here to register these girls. Would you mind watching our carriage and runosaurs for a little while?”

“Of course, mishter. Erm, mister!”

She turned bright red and looked down, embarrassed to have slipped on a word.

“Thanks,” I said, patting her head gently and handing her a tip.

“Let’s go, Lulu.”

“Yes, master.”

I headed toward the explorers’ guild entrance, Lulu following in her maid outfit.

Although it was as hot as early summer outside, the inside of the guild was comfortably cool. The floor was made of marble, making it look like the lobby of some big company.

There was some kind of conference booth to the right of the entrance, where a staff member and some wealthy-looking merchants were having a meeting.

Farther inside was a counter like you might see at a bank, with eight reception windows but only two receptionists. One was a businesslike-looking woman in her twenties, while the other was a handsome man in his thirties.

Arisa and the others were already talking to the female receptionist.

There didn’t seem to be any other customers at the moment. The male receptionist was watching Arisa and the others with a grin.

“Hurry, hurry!”

“Masterrr?”

“Over here, sir!”

“Here.”

The excited younger girls called me over to the counter, where the

receptionist smiled.

“Welcome, Sir Knight. My name is Kehna, and I’ll be taking care of you today. I understand you would like to register. Are you looking for a regular or a special registration?”

I hadn’t heard anything about this from the elf teachers or the explorers I befriended in the old capital.

I assumed Arisa had already told her I was a knight.

“What’s the difference between the two?”

“With a special registration, you can immediately receive your gold badge, which identifies you as an explorer. Unlike regular registration, there is a fee, but the gold badge is a magic tool that periodically broadcasts your exact location back to us. If you register your intended return time when you enter the labyrinth, a rescue party can use that signal to come retrieve you if you have not returned after a certain grace period.”

Broadcasting my location? No thank you.

Besides, since the location signal was sent only a few times a day, I got the sense that it was more for the purpose of collecting remains than rescuing anyone.

“We don’t intend to stray too far into the labyrinth, so we’ll stick with regular registration, please.”

“Certainly, sir. Now, may I have all your names, please?”

For some reason, we didn’t have to present any documents, and I was curious why.

“You don’t need to see any identification?”

“No, we only need a name for initial registration. There are a small amount of explorers who prefer to use an alias or false name.”

Huh. They didn’t seem too strict about all this. The labyrinth was sort of like a nationally owned mine that produced resources, so I was surprised they didn’t control entry a little more thoroughly.

“So are these eight names correct?”

As I opened my mouth to confirm, someone else charged in.

“Wait! Allow me to register, too, no?!”

It was Princess Meetia, who I’d thought was still back at the government office.

“Isn’t Lady Ravna with you, Princess?”

“She engaged herself in a fight with a rude noble. I took the opportunity to sneak here and register. Clever, no?”

I had suspected that the stern knight Ravna wouldn’t get along with Sokell, but it was a little concerning that she’d been so caught up arguing that she let her ward get away.

“But won’t you be scolded for registering without permission?”

“I will be an adult next year, no? And mine father said he would allow me to register if I do nothing else. Therefore, all should be fine, no?”

If she has her guardian’s permission, I guess that’s all right.

“Please register Lady Meetia here, too, then.”

Placing a pouch with the right amount of coins on the table, I added in a whisper, “A gold badge for Her Highness, please.”

It wouldn’t do for a princess to have an ordinary ID, I was sure.

This way, if Princess Meetia gave her guards the slip again and went into the labyrinth, they should be able to find her with the gold badge’s signal.

“Certainly, sir.”

The receptionist asked the princess’s full name, age, and intended location during her stay, recording it all in a book.

It was a pretty far cry from the regular registration, which required only a name.

“It will take some time to produce the gold badge, so we will have it sent to the viceroy’s guesthouse tomorrow.”

“Perfect! I thank thee.” The princess nodded gleefully.

“Your Highness!”

The stern-faced knight burst into the building fast enough to break down the door.

“That was fast, no? I expected no less of thee, Ravna...”

She must have noticed the princess had gone and come to retrieve her.

“...but thou could have given me a little longer, no?” the princess grumbled.

“Come with me, please, Your Highness.”

“Very well. Arisa, Lady Misanaria—we shall meet again, no? And, Sir Satou, I thank thee for thine assistance.”

Since she’d already thanked me for bringing them to Labyrinth City, this thank-you must have been for paying for the gold badge.

We saw the princess and company to the door, then returned to the teller.

“My apologies for the interruption.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble.”

Once I apologized, we continued the procedure.

“Here are your wood badges.”

She handed us small, thin sheets of wood with a string attached to each.

They had been branded with today’s date and a three-digit identification number.

“For the time being, this is your identification as an explorer. Wood badges are for novice explorers; if you enter the labyrinth and return with five or more monster cores per person, you will become official explorers and receive your bronze badges.”

The identification badges came in five types: wood, bronze, garnet, mithril, and gold.

Garnet badges were for mid-level explorers who could bring back a certain number of cores consistently each month, while mithril badges were awarded

only to top-notch explorers who could defeat an areamaster.

The gold badge, as had already been explained, was for nobles or anyone else wealthy enough to freely pay the fee.

“Please be aware that if you cannot bring back a single core within two months, the wood badge will no longer be valid.”

So they intended to sift out anyone who wanted only an identification badge.

“So now that we’ve got these badges, does that mean we can go into the labyrinth?”

“Yes, you can.” The receptionist smiled and nodded. “But make sure you prepare with supplies and equipment first, all right?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Aye-aye?”

“Of course, sir!”

“Mm.”

The younger crew’s excited voices filled the guild hall.

It certainly didn’t seem like they’d be willing to wait until the next day to go into the labyrinth.

Since they were so eager, I decided we could take a little peek inside the labyrinth once we found lodging at an inn and a place for our steeds and carriage.

“This is a nicer room than I expected.”

At the explorers’ guild’s recommendation, we got rooms in a high-class inn called The Blade of Glory for five days and six nights. They were well reputed for taking excellent care of horses and carriages, as well as for their famous lamb dishes.

The room cost a steep two gold coins per night, but considering that it was for eight people, maybe that wasn’t so bad.

There were separate buildings, one only for humans and one that included demi-humans, which was probably to avoid any conflict among them.

“Call me once you’ve changed into your armor, all right? I’ll go have some tea at the café by the lobby while I wait.”

With that, I hastened out of the room as the rest of the group started undressing to get changed.

Maybe I should teach them a little more modesty.

I could see the stable through the hall window, so I stopped in to check it out.

True to the explorers’ guild’s high acclaim, our horses and runosaurs looked quite content.

Because I’d replaced my floating carriage with an identical-looking normal one that I made for occasions like this, there was no fear of my secrets being found out. Thanks to my “Counterfeit” skill, it even had all the same little stains and scratches.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir. Your cart will be cleaned as soon as our specialist returns.”

“It’s quite all right. I was just checking on the horses.”

Once I’d reassured the stable master, I went to the café to drink some tea. It was made with excellent tea leaves, well befitting the high-class inn.

“Our apologies for keeping you waiting, master.”

After Liza came down in her armor to fetch me, I returned with her to the room.

She was equipped with her beloved Cricket Spear as always, but the rest of her equipment was recently made for the labyrinth.

“The new armor looks great on you.”

“Th-thank you, sir.”

Liza turned bright red when I complimented her new look.

At a glance, it was simple light armor made from white leather with giant beetle carapaces making up the chest plate, shoulder plates, and so on, but it was actually far stronger than even the heavy armor of Shigan knights.

The exterior was disguised with hard newt leather, but underneath it was the

incredibly sturdy hide of the giant monster fish Tobkezerra.

On top of that, I'd added a thin orichalcum jacket to protect from Holy Sword-class attacks.

It might have been a little excessive, but I wanted to take every possible measure to keep my friends from being hurt.

The carapace pieces themselves were only decoration, likely to break if they were ever hit by a gun or cannon blast.

I'd done a little practice with my "Metalworking" skill to make some simple designs on the exterior.

"Master, we will enter one at a time, so please appraise each of us, I request."

From the sound of things, I was in for a little fashion show.

Liza was the first, followed by Nana.

"I shall protect my comrades with my adamantite alloy shield, I vow!"

Nana struck a knightly pose as she delivered her line in monotone.

It felt like the kind of scene you'd see when you acquire a new character in a mobile RPG.

Nana's equipment was similar to Liza's, but instead of the jacket, she wore heavy orichalcum chain mail. And her carapace pieces weren't just for show: They were strengthened with sheets of adamantite alloy underneath.

Her shield was adamantite, too, but I'd covered it up with the shell of a war mantis.

Like Liza, she still carried the same weapon, a Magic Sword.

I'd made a new sheath to match her armor and shield.

It was hard to tell unless you looked closely, but I'd made the decorations on Nana's armor set in the design of a flock of baby chicks.

"Yes, you look very strong and dependable."

"Thank you for the appraisal, I declare."

It was hard to tell, but I think she was being a little bashful.

“Ta-daaa?”

“Ta-da-da-daaa, sir!”

Tama and Pochi entered the room together, striking their signature poses.

They were clearly going to stay that way until I complimented them.

“You both look very cool and cute.”

“Hee-hee...”

“Let me at ‘em, sir!”

Tama giggled shyly, and Pochi started shadowboxing on the spot to show that she was ready for a fight.

Their armors were very similar, but there were a few minor differences.

Pochi was equipped with a much smaller version of Nana’s shield, and both the shield and chest plate were decorated with cute paw-print designs.

Tama had two of the same kind of Magic Sword, and instead of ornamental carapaces, she had frilly magic items, which created a thin, slippery magic defense barrier.

Sadly, this wasn’t my works but a repurposing of something I’d found on one of the ships we salvaged on the sugar route. Normally it was used to reduce the friction between the ship and the water, increasing the speed.

“Compliment.”

Mia appeared next, giving a little twirl.

She was wearing short pants under her miniskirt to avoid the possibility of any undies-flashing—at least, that was the idea. I thought I caught a glimpse of something striped, but that must have just been the design on the shorts, I was sure.

“You look as cute as a princess, Mia.”

Since she’d demanded praise so directly, I offered a clichéd compliment.

Her new armor would have looked right at home in a magical-girl series: a frilly dress with a hard breastplate over it.

The exterior of the dress armor was made out of Yuriha fiber, the same material as my robes, while the interior was lined with fabric made from the giant monster fish's silver hide.

The silver hide was said to be able to repel even Advanced Light Magic and Holy Swords.

In a game, normally rearguard characters would wear paper-thin armor, but in this case, Mia's defenses were just as good as the beastfolk girls'.

For a weapon, I'd made her a cute staff out of wood from a Mountain-Tree branch, but that was mostly just for show.

In the labyrinth, I would have her use weapons like Fire Rods and Thunder Rods, which didn't require a chant; if she needed to use Water or Spirit Magic, I'd made a staff out of the wood of the World Tree.

The staff made of the glittering emerald-green clearbough from the World Tree was difficult to use. It wouldn't be much use to Mia or Arisa just yet.

After Mia, Lulu entered the room.

"Master, do you really think someone like me should wear such cute clothes?"

The armor I'd made based around a maid outfit looked like some kind of battle maid cosplay, but it only enhanced Lulu's overflowing charms.

"...I'm glad I made that."



“Um, master... It’s a little embarrassing if you keep staring at me like that.”

Oops. I’d gazed at the masterpiece known as Lulu so long that she had to stop me herself.

“Sorry. It looks really, really good on you.”

I had never been so painfully aware of my own lacking vocabulary.

If only I was a poet, I could sing the praises of Lulu’s miraculous maid cosplay...

“Thank you, sir. Even if you’re just being kind, I’m happy to hear that.”

“No, I really mean it,” I assured her firmly.

Lulu’s equipment was made from the same material as Mia’s.

However, since she’d learned self-defense arts in the elf village, I was hoping she could theoretically protect the rest of the rear guard, so I increased the density of the silver hide fiber to make its defense even better.

On top of that, I sewed the “Body Strengthening” magic circle and other runes into her clothes.

I hadn’t done this for the other girls’ equipment because they either already had that skill, would gain other skills and experience at a slower rate, or it might be a waste of their magic.

For her weapon, I had decided against giving her the Small Magic Cannon I repurposed into a Magic Sniper Rifle, though I’d let her use it on the sugar route. It was too powerful to use in a confined space, and it required bluecoins to keep firing in rapid succession.

Instead, I tried making a Thunder Rod rifle.

It was a custom creation of mine: a gun with the same mechanisms as a Thunder Rod that also allowed the user to fine-tune the intensity of the Thunder Bullets.

“Ta-daa! It’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for—the star of the show, Arisaaaa! No one in the entire galaxy can resist this cuteness...”

Arisa’s equipment was the same as Mia’s, just in different colors.

“Yep, can’t resist, totally.”

With a half-hearted response, I handed out matching cloaks to the entire group.

The cloaks all had a blue base, with the Pendragon family symbol embroidered on the back and left breast.

They were made from the same material as the rear guard’s clothes, with protection against cold, heat, sweat, and so on sewn into them.

I made the outsides the same color so they would be easy to spot, but the inner lining of each one was different to match the wearer’s tastes.

“Hey, why am I the only one who gets brushed off like garbage?! Don’t make me start pouting!”

Arisa puffed up her cheeks in protest.

“Sorry, sorry. Your new look is wonderful, too, Arisa. I wouldn’t be surprised if you start getting scouted for TV.”

“Hee-hee, you think so? ’Cause I do, too...”

When I relented and complimented her, Arisa puffed up her chest proudly and started posing some more.

“Come onnn?”

“Arisa, put your cloak on quickly, sir.”

“Mm. Labyrinth.”

The rest of the younger girls all bombarded Arisa.

“Oh right, I almost forgot.” Arisa threw on her cloak with dramatic flair.

“Master, you must equip your sword if you wish to use it, I advise.”

Sounding like a weapon shop owner from a video game, Nana handed me my fairy sword.

I normally didn’t carry it on me, since it was heavy and might mess up my clothes. But I figured I could equip it for our big explorer debut, so I accepted the sword from Nana and hung the sheath on my belt.

“Yep, you look manly, all right!”

Arisa crossed her arms and nodded sagely.

On either side of her, Tama and Pochi imitated the move, nodding in unison.

“All right, let’s head into the labyrinth!”

Whirling toward the door, Arisa put her fist in the air dramatically.

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

“Let’s-a go, sir!”

“Mm. Labyrinth.”

The younger group led the charge out of the inn.

We were taking a chartered carriage from the inn to the west gate leading to the labyrinth.

True to its name, the streets of Labyrinth City were numerous and complicated, giving a mazelike impression.

It was probably intended to buy time in case monsters ever escaped from the labyrinth.

As far as I could tell from my map, aside from the large main street connecting the north and south gates, the entire city was just as complicated.

However, I appeared to be the only one so interested in the layout of the city. The rest of the group was already thinking about the labyrinth.

“Eeee, this is my first time going to a real labyrinth! Do you think it’ll be sort of like the spriggan training grounds?”

The training grounds Arisa was referring to was a facility that was designed to imitate a labyrinth for the exploration-loving spriggans to train in.

The elf teachers had taken the girls there while I was busy dealing with the jellyfish incident.

From what I heard, it was designed by Trazayuya, who also made the Cradle.

“Not at aaaall?”

“It’s not a playground, sir! It’s a real, pulse-pounding, bloodcurdling

battlefield, sir!”

Tama and Pochi stood up in their seats, looking proud and superior.

They were rarely like this. It was pretty cute.

“You two, try to remain calm. At that rate, you’ll get hurt in the labyrinth.”

“Aye-aaaye...”

“Yes, sir.”

Liza coolly deflated the pair’s egos.

Mia and Lulu were quiet, maybe even nervous. Nana was functioning at her usual capacity, so she was probably fine.

As the group continued chatting, our carriage soon arrived at the plaza in front of the labyrinth.

The plaza was big enough to line up more than a thousand people, with one white building standing out.

“That’s the west guild. It’s the liveliest place in all of Celivera,” a middle-aged explorer explained as we passed by, staring at the building as if we were tourists.

I could see why he would sound so proud. It was an impressive building, almost like a small palace.

After staring at the west explorers’ guild building, we naturally started watching the people who were coming and going.

“Wow, look at all that sweet armor!”

“So fancyyy.”

“They look like birds, sir.”

“Kabuki?”

I wasn’t sure where Mia had learned that term, but overall, I agreed with the girls’ comments.

Many of the explorers were using armor made out of monster parts, but I wasn’t sure why so many of them had decorated them with feathers and other

protuberances. Maybe it was to intimidate monsters?

“Some of this equipment is rather strange.”

“Perhaps it is temporary armor, I offer.”

Liza and Nana seemed taken aback, too.

The explorers of Labyrinth City wore very unique armor. The younger they were, the more likely it was that they would be dressed in some strange equipment.

Some had pieces of wood or bone sewn onto their clothes for protection, while others carried spears with an ax head or sharpened bone for the tip. Maybe they didn't have enough money to buy proper armor.

Even the monster hunters in Puta had better armor than this, if I remembered correctly.

The explorers who fought in the tournament in the old capital looked fairly normal, so at least some of the more advanced explorers had a sense of tastefulness.

“There are lots of different races, too.”

I nodded at Liza. “I see beastfolk and even scalefolk.”

Unlike other cities, there were plenty of demi-humans here with their races on full display.

Those who wore hoods tended to be fairyfolk, mages, or some kind of nobles.

There were many wounded, too: I saw a fair amount of people whose faces or body parts were covered with dirty bandages.

“Master, many of these people seem to be wounded.”

Lulu looked worried as she gazed at all the people with bandages or canes.

“That's true. There are probably only so many priests and mages available, and it's not cheap to use magic potions regularly.”

We had homemade magic potions that we could use whenever we wanted, plus Mia's and my Recovery Magic, so we should be just fine.

According to my AR, most of them were simply injured, but a few had alarming-looking statuses like **Addicted [Demonic Potion]**.

The phrase *demonic potion* sounded familiar to me.

The elves in Bolenan Forest had said something about it being a forbidden medicine. There was a recipe in the elves' secret archives, but because they warned against it, I never read it.

In my opinion, dangerous drugs had no place in a fantasy world.

"All right, let's head to the gate!"

"Mm. No dawdling."

I wanted to have a look around the guild, but because it was considerably crowded, I allowed the younger group to lead us toward the west gate that was connected to the labyrinth.

There was a wall along the path to the west gate around three feet high, then stairs down a steep slope around the size of a school sports field. It somehow reminded me of an outdoor concert venue.

The gate was all the way at the bottom of the stairs.

From here, the steps would be almost six feet tall each, so we went to a narrow staircase near a street stall-lined path.

This was the path most people used to head into the labyrinth. All kinds of sellers tried to call out to us as we walked by.

"Sir Noble, do you have enough water and preserved foods? One meal only costs a single copper coin. How about it?"

"Mr. Nobleman! How about a lantern and some goblin oil? Nice and cheap!"

"Moron, a noble's not gonna use such smelly oil. We've got normal beast oil over here, mister!"

"You there, young nobleman, why not touch our Item Box for good luck before you level up? It's one silver coin per person, but if you're lucky, you or one of these lovely young ladies might pick up the 'Item Box' skill down the line!"

Talk about noisy.

A few of them did catch my interest, but if I talked to one of them, they'd all surround me. I just ignored them and kept walking.

"Hey there, new explorer. Don'cha need a map of the labyrinth?"

This time, a rather uncouth young man approached me with a map.

I already had my menu's map function, so I attempted to pass him by.

"Wait a sec! Our map's not like all those other maps, y'know! It's got info I gathered from some garnet-badge explorers!"

Without thinking, I stopped in place at the words *garnet badge*.

If I remembered correctly, garnet badges were assigned only to fairly experienced explorers.

I turned around to face the man.

"How much?"

"Three silver coins per map."

According to my "Estimation" skill, the market value for maps ranged from one to three large copper coins.

Talk about highway robbery.

"I'll buy it for three large copper coins."

"C'mon— isn't that an awfully low offer?"

"Then I don't need it."

"Wait a sec! I'll sell it to you for that just this once!"

When I started to walk away, the man hurriedly changed his tune.

"We sell the most accurate maps in Labyrinth City. If this one comes in handy, make sure you buy your next one from us, too!"

I exchanged the money for the map, which read *Section #1* in messy handwriting across the top. The map itself was all just lines and strange symbols, so I had no idea what it meant.

“How do you read it?”

“The reading guide is one copper coin—”

“That’s almost as much as what I paid for it already.”

The man tried to milk more money out of me, but I convinced him to hand it over for free.

“What’s this mark mean?”

“It’s a sign stone.”

According to the small man’s lengthy explanation, sign stones were left by early explorers in the old days to mark parts of the labyrinth they’d already explored. They were placed in the labyrinth at regular intervals and engraved with three pieces of information: section number, distance from the entrance, and serial number.

On top of that, they had one more important feature.

They would emit a red light if monsters were approaching and a blue light if humans were approaching. The man explained that it helped prevent explorers from attacking one another by mistake in the dark labyrinth.

“But listen, mister. Just ’cause the sign stone’s glowing blue, that don’t mean you should let your guard down.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not all just explorers and salvagers in the labyrinth—there are also robbers known as plunderers who target explorers.”

Now that he mentioned it, I did remember one of the elf teachers saying something similar in Bolenan Forest.

“If those guys are coming, the sign stones’ll still glow blue.”

I see. So if you let your guard down because you think it’s just other humans coming, they might jump you.

“What’s the best thing to do if you’re attacked by these plunderers?”

“That ain’t an easy question...”

If they attacked you right off the bat, the man said, you could kill them or capture them and sell them as criminal slaves. However, if they pretended to be friendly, it would be difficult to distinguish them from ordinary explorers.

As a result, unless the explorers you ran into were familiar faces, it was better to stay on your guard until you put distance between your party and theirs.

“Good to know. Thank you.”

Appearing satisfied, the man waved and looked around in search of a new customer.

As soon as he found one and headed over, we were surrounded by some young kids in clothes too small for them. This was a pretty busy plaza, all right.

Were they beggars, I wondered, or maybe vagrants?

Curious, I inspected their detailed information and found that their professions read **Bag Carrier**.

For some reason, many of them were small-statured girls.

“Mr. Noble, please hire me.”

“Hire me—I’ll work for two copper coins a day.”

“I’ll take one copper coin a day!”

“Hey, don’t try to steal my customer!”

“If you’ll feed me, I don’t need any money. I’ll do anything!”

The young girls clamored around me.

If Hayato the Hero was here, he would probably be shouting, *No touching, Satou!* One of the girls tried to grab my sleeve, but Liza gently pushed her back.

“Step away, please.”

When Liza glared at them, the girls backed away a little, but they didn’t stop their sales pitches.

I didn’t want to be harsh and drive them away, but they were all only level 1 or 2, far too weak for us to bring them into the labyrinth.

Soon, I heard a tummy growl from among the little girls.

Perhaps sensing a kindred spirit, Tama and Pochi looked up at me pleadingly.

I couldn't just leave them like this.

Looking around, I saw a young woman selling *manju* buns start zipping in my direction. That was convenient.

"Care for a labyrinth *manju*? They're just a copper coin each, and they'll fill your belly."

This was a popular food in Labyrinth City. It was made with potato flour on the outside and red bean paste, potato, and beans on the inside.

It reminded me more of a grilled *manju* than the classic steamed kind.

They were pretty big, so they should keep a child full for a while.

"Ooh, labyrinth *manju*!"

"This is my first meal in aaages."

"Mm, what a treat!"

"We'll work hard for you, mister!"

Accepting the labyrinth *manju*, the young girls started chowing down earnestly.

Their enthusiasm piqued my interest enough for me to buy several for my group to try them, too.

...*Gross.*

It was so bad, it could almost compete with the awful gabo fruit dishes I'd eaten in Seiryuu City.

If these girls considered such a gross food a "treat," I was a little worried about how they ate normally.

"It tingles, sir."

Pochi stuck out her tongue and made a strange face.

Eating the dark-red mixture of potatoes, beans, and who knows what else was in the filling seemed to cause a mild paralysis effect.

I guess in Labyrinth City, you had to watch for traps even in the food you

bought on the street...

“Satou, turn the pretty on.”

This was a fairly long sentence for Mia, but I didn’t know what she meant.

“Pretty?”

“Spirit light.”

She seemed to want me to release my spirit light, which I normally kept suppressed.

Just to be safe, I used “Search Entire Map” to make sure there was no one in the city with the “Spirit Vision” skill.

My spirit light was pretty unique and eye-catching, so I had to be careful.

Just as I was about to do as she said, I realized what Mia was getting at and turned on my “Miasma Vision.”

Yikes.

Most of the food being sold along this street had mold-like black miasma clinging to it.

It wasn’t particularly dense, which must be why Mia figured my spirit light could fend it off.

Mia didn’t have “Miasma Vision,” but spirits wouldn’t approach anywhere with lots of miasma, so she must have noticed that something was strange here.

“Pretty,” Mia said in awe, gazing at my spirit light.

I’d unleashed only a small amount, but it was enough to thin out all the miasma on the street as well as on the labyrinth *manju* in my hand—not even a speck remained.

“What happened?” Arisa asked, curious.

I explained to her about the miasma.

Most likely, the food being sold here contained monster meat that hadn’t been purified.

That would explain why nearly one in five people had miasma poisoning here.

“This still tastes gross, though.”

Arisa was right: Even with the miasma banished, the labyrinth *manju* was still disgusting.

I didn’t want to eat it, but I didn’t want to throw it out. Just as I was wondering what to do, I noticed a child staring at the *manju* in my hand, so I gladly passed it off. One man’s trash was another man’s treasure, I supposed.

“All right, let’s head into the labyrinth.”

I left the little girls behind and walked toward the west gate.

For some reason, the kids tried to follow us, but I told them we couldn’t take them with us and that they had to stay put.

“It looks like the little girls want to join your party. What will you do?”

“Oh, be quiet.”

Arisa was imitating a system message from some RPG, but I ignored her.

As the west gates closed behind us, the group of kids looked sad to be left behind, but I hardened my heart and refused to turn back.

March of Death

Satou here. In online multiplayer games, the act of leading a group of monsters over to other players is called a “train.” It’s a huge pain, so nobody likes a player who does it.

“Ooh! Now, this is how a labyrinth entrance is supposed to be!”

“Mm.”

Once we passed through the west gate, there was a staircase leading about fifteen feet down, ending in a tall, wide semiunderground tunnel large enough for a four-ton truck to drive through.

Tama and Pochi silently shifted closer to me, possibly remembering their time in the Seiryuu City labyrinth.

They were looking around alertly at all times, their usual carefree demeanors gone.

This seemed to affect the other girls, who also started to look more serious.

It’s not good to worry too much, but this level of caution was probably fine.

Latticed windows near the ceiling let in some light—not enough that you could read a book easily but enough that you could walk without a torch or lantern.

Beyond the latticed windows, we could occasionally see the feet of patrolling soldiers.

According to my map, this place was called **the Path of Death** and was technically not part of the labyrinth.

The corridor turned a corner about a hundred feet away, so we couldn’t see the entrance to the labyrinth proper. There was a sliding iron gate near the corner that could be closed in case of emergencies.

Between this and the patrolling soldiers, they had certainly taken plenty of measures against escaping monsters.

Hmm?

I saw on my radar that four explorers were approaching from ahead of us.

Their levels were pretty low, around 7 to 9—no, if an average knight was level 10, I supposed that might make them mid-level explorers.

One of them appeared to be severely wounded.

“Someone’s comiiiiing?”

“I smell blood, sir.”

Tama and Pochi were the first to notice the explorer group’s approach.

Before long, we saw them round the corner.

“Nana, protect Arisa and Lulu,” Liza ordered immediately.

“Understood.”

What about Mia? I wondered, but then I saw that Liza was moving in front of Mia herself.

“I’m Jekeh of Red Ice! But if you wanna fight, it’ll have to be some other time. We’ve got a major injury here!”

The young man in the lead waved at us as he shouted. “Red Ice” seemed to be his party’s name.

I couldn’t see the injured person’s face from here, but his armor was broken, and the shirt wrapped around the wound was dripping with blood.

“Yikes, that looks really bad...”

“Master?”

Arisa and Lulu trembled at the sight.

They’d seen all kinds of robbers and pirates get injured, but what with the darkness and general atmosphere of this place, maybe they were projecting onto the injured party this time.

“Satou?”

Mia looked at me for permission to use Healing Magic, but I held up a hand to stop her.

“My name is Satou, a new explorer. Please use this medicine if you like.”

With that, I pulled out two watered-down magic potions from my Garage Bag. At their level, this should be more than enough.

“Sorry, but we don’t have any money on hand. We can pay you once our leader catches up with us from sellin’ the cores. Is it too much to ask to let us use that medicine in advance?”

“No, go right ahead.”

I wasn’t planning on charging them in the first place, so I just nodded and gave the vials to Jeje.

“Huh? Are these magic potions?”

“Yes, that’s right. More importantly, you’d better have your friend drink them right away.”

“Right. We owe ya one.”

The first vial restored nearly 60 percent of the injured person’s health. I couldn’t see because of the fabric wrapped around it, but the wound had probably closed.

“...Ahhh, I feel better already. Thank you, young man,” the explorer said in a husky voice as Jeje steadied him on his feet.

He tried to stand up on his own, but the blood loss sent him falling back into Jeje’s arms. These low-grade potions didn’t restore lost blood. Only resting for a while would fix that.

“Well, we’ll be on our way.”

“W-wait a minute. We haven’t paid you yet...”

“It was a gift from someone else. Please don’t worry about it. Until we meet again, if fate wills it so.”

We couldn’t stand around doing nothing, so I ushered my group down the hall.

From behind me, Jeje warned, “There’s a rogue soldier mantis roaming in section 4-1. Make sure you keep your distance!” I thanked him with a wave of my hand.

After seeing that gruesome injury, Lulu and Mia looked pale.

Arisa had lost some of her enthusiasm, too, but not as much as the others.

“Would you rather call it quits for today, you two?”

“N-no, I’m all right.”

“Mfine.”

The two of them were obviously putting on brave faces, so I held their hands as we walked through the hall.

If they didn’t feel better by the time we reached the entrance to the labyrinth, I decided we would turn back there.

Before long, though, they started smiling again. I guess I was worried for nothing. Maybe it was holding their hands that cheered them up.

“We’re heeere?”

“It’s a gate with a scary face, sir.”

“Is that the gate into the labyrinth?”

“Probably.”

At the end of the path was a large open room, with a fifteen-foot-tall door looming directly ahead.

The door was made of some mysterious jet-black metal, with a red ogre face carved into the surface.

There were several levels of steps in front of the gate, with a stone counter set in front.

On the other side of the counter were several explorers’ guild staff, plus four high-level guards, including a magic user.

At the counter was a young man who appeared to be an explorer, having some kind of dispute with a female guild employee about the price of the cores he was selling.

“Is that the leader of the people we ran into before?”

“Looks that way.”

Examining our surroundings, I saw children of various races sitting in a corner on the other side of the room from the counter.

They were all wearing simple, shabby clothing, none of them with any weapons or armor.

According to the detailed information from my AR, these kids were bag carriers, all level 3 or below.

Unlike the friendly kids we'd met outside, though, these ones didn't try to approach us.

"Kiiids?"

"Lots of children, sir."

"Mrrr?"

Pochi, Tama, and Mia tilted their heads in bewilderment.

The obviously unplanned move was in such perfect unison that I couldn't help smiling. Arisa looked annoyed that she hadn't gotten in on the action.

While none of the bag-carrying children spoke to us, their eyes were all locked on me.

"What do you think they're doing?" Arisa murmured.

"Their eyes are scary."

Lulu sounded uncomfortable, a sentiment I agreed with wholeheartedly.

Since they were all kids, I was worried that Nana would try to abduct them, but...

"They are not young enough, I dismiss."

...she put my fears to rest.

"Master, over here!"

Arisa beckoned me over to a noticeboard near the counter.

There were several flyers posted on the board.

"Requests for monster parts?"

There were no requests from the guild; most were from artisans, shopkeepers, and so on. A small handful were from nobles or merchants.

The lower half of each flyer was blank, with dates, names, and ID numbers written in.

“That’s right.”

Instead of Arisa, the person who answered my murmur was a good-looking young man squatting next to the noticeboard.

According to my AR, he was the child of a Labyrinth City merchant.

“I imagine a young noble such as yourself does not need anyone to read or write for him, but I can direct you to the best deals if you like.”

He was probably here to earn some extra money. This land had a fairly low literacy rate, which would make reading and dictation services in high demand.

I handed the boy some change and asked him about these so-called deals.

“The meat of maze frogs and the carapaces of beetle-type monsters are always sought after, so I recommend those.”

“It is delicious,” Liza muttered next to me, nodding wisely. She must be remembering the grilled-barbecue party we had in the Seiryuu City labyrinth.

Glancing over, I saw that Tama and Pochi were nodding along seriously.

They were probably just imitating Liza.



“What about these ones, like the ant nectar or the labyrinth mushrooms? Those aren’t as good?”

“For the nectar, you’d have to enter a maze ant nest, which can be extremely dangerous. And I hear those mushrooms only grow in much deeper sections of the labyrinth. Neither of them is worth the risk.”

From the sound of things, this kid had learned quite a bit about the labyrinth by hanging around here earning pocket change.

“Also, these requests aren’t ongoing. Be careful. Just ’cause it’s here when you go into the labyrinth doesn’t mean it’ll still be up when you come back out.”

That made sense. They probably didn’t want to have their requests filled by a bunch of different people and end up with excess materials.

“Master, the woman at the counter wishes to speak with you.”

Turning around, I saw that the staff member at the counter with an intelligent-looking face was beckoning to me.

It looked as though she’d finished her exchange with the leader of Red Ice.

I gave the boy a tip as thanks for the information and headed over to the counter.

“Yes?”

“Forgive my inquiry, but are you a new explorer?”

“Yes, we’ll be in your care starting today. My name is Satou.”

“My, how polite. I’m sure they told you all about it when you registered, but this is where you can sell the monster cores you acquire in the labyrinth. You can exchange other monster parts from the requests posted on the wall here, as well.”

I listened respectfully to the staff member’s smooth explanation.

“Furthermore, this is only necessary for gold-badge holders, but nobles such as yourself are invited to report your expected exploration time here before entering the labyrinth.”

“I understand. We don’t expect to be long, but I’d like to request six days, just

in case.”

I picked that length because it was the same amount of time we had reserved at the inn.

Still, I was guessing we’d be back by the end of the night at the latest.

Oh yeah, might as well ask while I’m here.

“By the way, who are those children over there?”

“Ah, they’re bag carriers, waiting to be hired by explorer parties. They change places with the children outside once every chime, but they’re not allowed to call to potential customers down here. The echoes are far too noisy,” she added.

Still, if you’re going to hire someone to carry a bag, why not hire an adult instead?

As I was about to inquire further on the subject, a group of ten or so explorers emerged from the labyrinth door. They were all warrior types, averaging around level 20. Three of them appeared to be bag carriers, but they were large-built beastfolk, not children.

While the rest of the party put down their things to rest, one explorer with a bearlike bearded face walked in our direction.

He was probably the leader of the explorer party, since he alone was level 30.

“Hey, Bena. Sorry to interrupt, but do you still have that request for boar-spider meat?”

“I’m sorry. Bearded Owl brought some in this morning, so I don’t think we’re buying any more right now.”

So the woman I’d been talking with was called Bena.

“Tch, those bastards again? Fine, then. Bena, cook this meat up for us, will you?”

“Very well. Rick, bring out the grill, please. Including coal, the lending fee is one large copper coin. For my labor, all I’ll charge you is a piece of the best cut of back meat.”

“Crafty little fox, aren’t you?”

Once the bear-bearded explorer handed a large copper coin to the clerk, he turned toward the children.

“Hey, brats! I’ll treat you to some meat, too, okay? Just make sure you pay me back with the praise of your choice before you eat, like ‘You’re so cool, Mr. Dozon!’ or ‘Thank you, Mr. Dozon!’”

At that, the children cheered so loudly that it hurt my ears.

Tama and Pochi seemed intrigued by this unfamiliar kind of meat, but it would be cruel to take food away from these malnourished kids. I signaled to them to refrain.

“...Shall we get going?”

Once we each presented our wood badges at the counter, we walked over to the labyrinth door.

I was half expecting an entrance fee, but there didn’t seem to be any.

“Open sesameee?”

“I want to open it, too, sir.”

“That door is awfully heavy, so it might be tough.”

As Tama and Pochi headed over to open the heavy-looking door, the clerk called out to them with a smile.

“Heave-hooo?”

“Hi-ya, sir!”

“...What?”

Tama and Pochi opened the door with ease, causing the staff member’s jaw to all but hit the floor.

That’s an overreaction, I thought, grinning as we entered the labyrinth.



“Uuugh, more staaairs?”

On the other side of the door was a wide set of stairs leading downward

under a high ceiling. Instead of a straightforward or spiral staircase, these steps zigzagged from side to side. They had probably built stairs where there used to be a steep slope.

The banisters had slits at regular intervals, large enough for arrows to be fired down the stairs.

This was probably another measure against invading monsters. Each level of the steps had a gunning platform with a cannon draped in cloth. According to my AR display, these cannons fired real physical bullets, not magic.

There were two soldiers posted at each of the platforms.

The soldiers seemed to have a lot of time on their hands: They were playing a shogi-like board game. At least they weren't drinking or sleeping on the job. The soldiers were all strong-looking demi-humans, like wolffolk and lionfolk.

We greeted them as we passed by, and while they seemed disgruntled, they still waved back with a friendly hello.

"I'm not gonna make iiit..."

"You can do it, Arisa."

As I smiled at Arisa and Lulu's exchange, I used my "Search Entire Map" as per usual.

This place is huge.

It was bigger even than the labyrinth ruins under the old capital.

Comparing it to my aboveground maps, it seemed to extend all the way underneath the enormous desert in the west of the Shiga Kingdom.

The map called the location **Celivera Labyrinth: Upper Floor**. That meant on top of it being wide, this wasn't even all of it. There was definitely at least one floor below this, maybe even more.

I adjusted the scale of the map so I could get an idea of the whole picture.

It was like looking at over a hundred tubers connected by roots stretching in every direction.

And each one of these clusters consisted of anywhere from thirty to a

hundred small rooms, with a large cavern in the center.

The explorers' guild called this tuber "section 1."

There are tons of monsters, too.

When I searched my map for monsters, I was assailed by so many results, it probably would've slowed down a computer something fierce.

Luckily, I was able to cancel the search, so I switched the target to only the few sections nearest to the entrance.

The first area, section 1, had more explorers than monsters.

This time, I searched for all the explorers within section 1 and sections 2 through 5, which connected directly to section 1, and found that there were more than fifteen hundred in total.

It was rare to see any of them on their own; most traveled in parties of three to five people.

The distance to sections 2 and 4 was considerable, but 3 and 5 seemed close enough that you could make it there and back in a day. In the latter was an expedition group of more than ten people, all from levels 20 to 30.

"Master, are there still more stairs?"

"We're only halfway there. Maybe you should start lifting or jogging so you can build up a little more stamina, Arisa."

"Uuugh..."

Arisa looked tearful, but I just patted her back lightly and continued down the stairs.

Unlike the large stairs that led to the Lalakie ruins in the southern islands, because there were other people here, I couldn't just float us along with Practical Magic.

I didn't want to spoil her too much, but if she couldn't go on any farther, I supposed I could carry her.

"Touchdooown?"

"We're here, sir!"

“Whew, finallyyyy...”

In the end, Arisa ran out of steam partway down the stairs, and I wound up carrying her on my back.

“Master, there is a door ahead, I report.”

“Mm, big.”

Sure enough, there was a fifteen-foot-tall set of double doors blocking our way forward.

It seemed to be the type that you pushed inward to open.

“Perhaps it’s to bar entry for monsters if they try to come through?” Liza said, pushing open the doors.

“That’s right, young lady. Welcome to the gates of hell.”

A short-statured foxfolk man in a military uniform greeted her on the other side.

“Whaddaya mean, ‘gates of hell’? Gimme a break!”

“Ouch, Captain!”

A muscular man socked the foxfolk man on the jaw.

He had the build of a troll or an ogre, but the captain was an ordinary human.

“Never seen you around here. This is the frontline garrison of the labyrinth army. Don’t hang around too long; just pick one of the three paths and head on in.”

Behind the men was a cavern around half the size of a baseball stadium, lit up by magic and filled with around three hundred soldiers.

They were set up in an encampment near the three doorways leading inside, with cannons and Magic Cannons pointing at all of them.

The other, smaller holes and doors seemed to have been sealed off, probably to make it easier to defend.

“Captain, the middle path is for garnet badges only, isn’t it? You gotta tell people these things.”

“Shut up. I was just about to.”

A second punch landed on the foxfolk man’s face.

Quite a violent bunch around here.

“The middle path only connects to a room called Hades, which leads down into the middle floor of the labyrinth. We can’t have any inexperienced explorers going in there and causing a monster chain rampage.”

A “chain rampage” was probably similar to the kind of thing you see in online games where people attract a bunch of monsters and run away, leading the monsters with them.

“Right. It’s a serious crime to cause a chain rampage in the labyrinth, so be careful, got it? Especially if you bring ’em all the way back here—you’d be looking at a hefty fine at best. That or getting sent off to the coal mines as a criminal slave.”

“Uh-huh. If it’s just weak monsters, the fine won’t be so bad, but if a soldier gets killed in the process, there’ll be more than just money to pay.”

I thanked the two soldiers for their warnings before we left the garrison behind.

The pair of soldiers walked back toward the stairs we’d come down.

“Those two were the kind of characters you’d meet in a tutorial level, huh?” Arisa remarked as she watched them go.

It seemed rude to insult them after they were nice enough to tell us all that.

“Don’t say things like that, all right?”

“Okaaaay, I’m sorryyyy.”

After a light scolding, Arisa meekly apologized for her rudeness.

“Master, should we proceed along the left path or the right path? I inquire.”

“Let’s see... How about this one?”

Since those explorers were kind enough to warn us, I decided to head toward area 4-1, where the “rogue soldier mantis” lurked.

My kids should be able to defeat it with ease, and it seemed unsafe to let a relatively dangerous monster roam around in a low-level area.

Incidentally, “area 4-1” referred to “area 4 from the area-1 entrance.” This naming convention had started because there were some places within the same area that could be accessed only by way of other areas.

“Hey, you!”

As we were about to enter the door to the main passage, one of the soldiers called out to stop us.

“You gonna be all right in those clothes?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine, thank you.”

With only my ordinary clothes and fairy sword, I probably looked like I was dressed a little lightly for the labyrinth.

“Besides, we’re only taking a look around today. We’ll come back once we’ve explored area 1.”

“Yeah, that’d be for the best.”

Nodding to the kind soldier, I entered the door that Liza was holding open.

“This is a huge hallway.”

Arisa and the others looked around in awe at the large space.

“According to the map I bought, it’s the great hall.”

“It’s darker than I expected.”

“It should be easy enough to walk, but we may not be able to detect monsters lying in wait.”

The only illumination was an occasional light source on one side of the hall at knee level that cast a faint glow on the floor.

They seemed to be the magic tools called “sign stones” that the map seller had told me about. Just as he said, the light turned from white to blue as we approached.

“Shall I use Mana Light? I inquire.”

“Good idea. It’s a bit dark, so please do light the way, Nana.”

“Yes, master.”

I probably could have used my own Mana Light spell, but it was so bright that it might look strange to other explorers. Leaving it to Nana instead was a better idea.

Nana’s Foundation ability activated, and glowing Mana Lights appeared on the vanguards’ helmets and the rear guard’s staffs.

I’d added a small ornamentation on the helmets to direct the glow from Mana Light forward.

“Master, how shall we arrange our formation?”

“While we’re walking, let’s have Lulu, Arisa, and Mia in the middle; Nana, Tama, and Pochi in the front; and Liza and me bringing up the rear.”

With Tama and Pochi in the front, they would definitely be able to detect any traps or monsters up ahead, and Liza could easily repel any possible attacks from behind.

The group should be able to fight without depending on me for now. It might be best to let them grow instead of being too overprotective.

“Fluffyyy?”

“There’s something above us, sir.”

The Mana Lights on Tama’s and Pochi’s helmets illuminated some tennis-ball-size puffballs floating around near the ceiling. There were quite a few of them.

“Mrrr. Spirit eaters.”

Looking uncharacteristically angry, Mia produced a fire staff from her Fairy Pack.

Activating Spirit Vision, I saw that the creatures were indeed catching and eating small spirits.

They must be monsters of some kind.

“Destroy.”

A fireball shot from Mia's staff up to the ceiling, burning all the puffballs in the area into smoke.

"They're pretty wimpy."

Just as Arisa said, the creatures were burning away as soon as they made contact with the flame.

Once all the spirit eaters had been destroyed, Mia gave a little *hmph!* of obvious satisfaction and put away the staff.

"Good work."

"Mm, thanks."

Mia puffed up her chest, and I patted her head in response.

"I'll search for more enemies with Space Magic."

Arisa readied her staff and looked around.

"Mm, me next."

"All right, let's take turns, then."

Mia also knew a Spirit Magic spell that was good for finding monsters, so she seemed to want to contribute next time.

"Here goes!"

"Aye-aye..."

Tama covered her ears just as Arisa unleashed the spell.

I felt a similar flow of magic to the Practical Magic spell Signal.

"Nope, nothing," Arisa declared.

"Buuugs?"

"Little lizards and bats, too, sir."

"No, not those," she informed them. "I meant there are no monsters."

"Awww..."

"That's too bad, sir."

Tama and Pochi looked around in disappointment.

They didn't seem to know what to do.

"Don't worry. There will be more once we go in a little farther."

The pair perked up at that, so we continued our exploration.

Area 1 seemed to be picked clean by explorers—there were hardly any monsters.

Groups of monsters did use a few passageways to get around at times, but they weren't connected to any of the paths the explorers were on. Thanks to that, they never encountered one another.

After I observed the map for a while, I saw a tunnel open up between two such paths in the distance, and a battle began. That must be how the monsters appeared.

"It is hard to see even with the light, I report."

Various columns and stone statues lined the walls of the corridor, along with occasional sets of stone steps that didn't seem to lead anywhere.

There were occasional curtain-like objects hanging from the ceiling, too, most likely dusty spiderwebs.

We also passed occasional hollows in the walls and ceilings that looked like small passages.

The ventilation-like holes near the ceiling seemed to be traversed by small monsters; occasionally, moth-or hornworm-like monsters would poke their heads out and consume some of the fluffy spirit eaters.

Both varieties were very low-level, so we left them for other explorers.

"Something's theere?"

"I hear fighting up ahead, sir."

Tama and Pochi seemed to have picked up on a battle farther down the path.

About two hundred feet down, five explorers were fighting three demi-goblins.

Since there was constant noise coming from the ventilation holes near the ceiling in the labyrinth, it was somewhat difficult to detect faraway noises.

Even Tama and Pochi took longer to notice than usual.

According to the information on my radar, the battle wasn't taking place in the great hall we were exploring but a path that branched off up ahead. It wasn't too far from where we were.

When we passed nearby, one of the explorers called out a warning to us.

"These goblins are ours. Keep moving."

"All right."

I gave a brief response so as not to distract them too much.

It seemed to be a pretty intense brawl: Even though the demi-goblins were only levels 1 and 2, all the explorers were wounded.

The explorers seemed to be relative beginners, all around level 3. They were wearing hemp-woven vests and armor made of strung-together bones. They were fighting with short spears and light pickaxes that were pretty obviously homemade.

They were all brawlers, but since only a small percentage of explorers had any magic skills, that wasn't too unusual.

While I was contemplating all that, Nana whirled around from the front of the group.

"Master, I have located a suspicious group of larvae, I report."

"What do you mean?"

In an area where part of the great hall turned into a cliff, some children were peering down from above.

The eldest boy seemed to be an explorer, while the other five children were all bag carriers.

The kids were carrying what looked like a stretcher woven from grass.

"Big Brother Boma, behind you!"

One of the kids called out a warning, and the explorer boy and the others all spun around alertly and readied their weapons, which were really just clubs that looked more like sticks.

We must have startled them.

“Hello there.”

I moved my hand away from my sword and called out to them, but their postures didn't waver.

I had the rest of the group wait while I walked over to the cliff.

Looking down, I saw that a group of young explorers was engaged in a life-and-death battle against some demi-goblins.

“Damn this stupid, fat goblin!”

The “fat goblin” in question was a actually slightly stronger type called a “demi-goblin grappler.”

“Guess I gotta use my trump card!”

The ax user who appeared to be the group's leader swallowed some kind of pill.

Then his movements suddenly became faster, and he went from a losing battle against the grappler to gaining a decent advantage.

According to my AR, the medicine he'd just taken was a pill form of **Demonic Potion**.

Considering how effective it was, it was no wonder that people would use it even if it was a dangerous illegal drug.

Although, since it was illegal, there had to be some kind of nasty side effect.

The battle was over soon after that, and the explorers began disassembling the defeated demi-goblins and taking the cores.

Finally, the group finished collecting the cores and left the demi-goblin corpses behind, moving on to find their next prey.

One of them seemed to notice the children and muttered a disgusted “tch, corpse pillagers” as they left.

Indeed, Corpse Pillager was among the boy's titles.

“Let's go! Grab 'em before any other monsters eat 'em!”

As soon as the explorers below the cliff were gone, the boy led the children down the stone steps with the woven stretcher in tow.

I was curious, so I called out to the boy.

“What do you use the goblin corpses for?”

“W-we sell ’em to a butcher.”

For real?

So they even eat demi-goblin meat in Labyrinth City...

It was all well and good that people were more willing to try monster meat than before, but I didn’t have the courage to eat anything so humanoid.

“I-it’s not like that! We don’t steal ’em! We only take what gets left behind!”

Misunderstanding my silence, the boy started defending himself.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I wasn’t doubting that.”

“J-just so you know, we don’t eat ’em, all right? That’d make you so sick, your body’d go nasty and rotten.”

Realizing what I was thinking, the boy corrected me.

He explained that although demi-goblin meat wouldn’t kill you, it had a high chance of making you sick if consumed, so it was forbidden to take it outside the labyrinth.

“Is that what causes Goblin Disease?”

“I dunno. I don’t think so, though?”

The boy tilted his head and shrugged.

“So what does the butcher use it for, then?”

“They have a slime eat it and turn it into oil and bones.”

Oh?

I asked the boy where the butcher was so I could check it out on the map.

In a small room within the labyrinth, there was a lizardfolk monster tamer with the titles Butcher and Slime User. He was accompanied by four trained

monsters called “oil slimes.”

It was fairly far away from here, which was probably why the explorers didn’t bother taking the corpses there themselves.

“So even goblins have a use in everyday life... Humans are amazing, hmm?”

“Sright. They might make fun and call us ‘corpse pillagers,’ but without us, they wouldn’t be able to get bones for their armor or goblin oil for their lanterns.”

The boy exploded into a little rant. He must have a lot of built-up frustration about the subject.

“Besides, if we left those corpses lying around in the labyrinth, it’d be crawling with coreless and cursed monsters.”

“What are those?”

I’d never heard those terms before. I pressed for more information.

“‘Coreless’ are walking corpses without a monster core. ‘Cursed’ corpses don’t move, but if you get too close, they can grab your legs and curse you.”

So we shouldn’t carelessly get too close to corpses, either. Labyrinths really were dangerous.

“The fat ones are so heavyyy.”

“Help us out, Big Bro!”

“Wait a sec—I’ll be right there!”

The carrier kids were grumbling from the bottom of the cliff, so the boy turned to help them.

Before he left, I gave him enough copper coins for the group as thanks for all the information.

“Wow! You sure, mister?”

“Of course. Thanks for answering all my questions.”

“Heh-heh, anytime!”

I watched the boy descend the cliff in high spirits, then went back to where

my group was waiting.

“The monster pickings certainly are slim in area 1.”

As we continued along the great hall, we saw many beginner explorers fighting hard against monsters and competing for kills.

“Master, the sign stones have begun displaying a new number, I report.”

“Fooour?”

“It says 1-4, sir.”

The trio walking up ahead had found a particularly large sign stone.

This seemed to be the crossroads between the path around the rest of area 1 and the branched-off path into area 4.

At the very edge of my radar’s range, I saw red dots.

“Maybe we’ll start seeing more monsters soon?”

“I’d say so...”

I nodded at Arisa as I checked my map.

The red dots were mainly maze ants. And tons of them, at that.

There were almost three hundred in total, broken up into groups of anywhere from ten to fifty.

There were also three parties of explorers and carriers fleeing from the ants, heading in our direction.

This must be the “monster chain rampage” the soldiers right outside the labyrinth told us about.

These monsters weren’t much of a threat to us, but their numbers were somewhat impressive.

To the other explorers in here, it might be a pretty major problem.

“...It looks like there’ll be plenty of fighting to go around pretty soon.”

“Let me investigate.”

Arisa seemed to detect that my response carried a bit of meaning.

“Me next.”

“Oh right, it’s your turn this time.”

We’d been alternating between Arisa’s Space Magic and Mia’s Spirit Magic for detection, so this time it must have been Mia’s turn.

“■■■■ ■ **Cowardice Sylph** *Okubyou na Kaze.*”

Mia used an enemy-detecting Spirit Magic spell.

A yellow-green wind raced through the labyrinth, bringing information back to Mia.

“Satou, lots of enemies.”

Please don’t make it sound like I have a ton of people who hate me.

“People comiiing?”

“Sounds like bugs, too, sir.”

Listening with their ears to the ground, Tama and Pochi seemed to have picked up on the approaching explorers and monsters from far away.

“How many are coming?”

Arisa looked to me seriously, but I couldn’t help responding a little mischievously.

“You mean people or enemies?”

“Enemies, of course,” she snapped immediately.

“Three hundred.”

“Th-three hundred?”

“Master, we should retreat, I propose.”

“I agree with Nana, master.”

“Mm.”

Lulu clung to my arm anxiously. They were all pretty quick to make a prudent decision.

I supposed any meatheads who would want to fight a three-digit number of

enemies wouldn't do well in a labyrinth, where you have to conserve your energy.

"Don't worryyyy?"

"We can do it, sir. As long as our master's with us, it'll be easy, sir!"

Oh right. I guess our own party has a couple of meatheads.

Tama and Pochi struck some rather strange poses.

I patted their heads. "What would you do if I wasn't with you?"

"Run away, of course, sir."

"Get outta heeeere?"

Hmm?

So they weren't total meatheads—they just trusted me that much.

"Good answer. If I'm not with you, you should never try to take on such a large group of enemies, even if they're not very strong."

Our group had fought large numbers of undead and pirates on the sugar route, but I'd been with them, and it was never more than between three and five enemies per person.

Of course, the Skeleton King and Sea Lord we had fought in the Lalakie incident were far more dangerous.

"What if we have no choice but to fight?" Arisa asked.

"What do you think?" I responded.

"Hmm... Get to an advantageous position?"

"That's right. Find a place where the enemy won't be able to come at you all at once."

"Yep, bottlenecking is a must when you're hunting solo in online games."

So that's where she learned that...

In the MMORPGs I played, most people fought solo only against weak monsters that could be defeated in one hit, but I guess every game is different.

Now, we weren't obligated to save explorers we didn't know, but since we'd finally encountered monsters, I figured it was a good chance to get my group some experience.

"There are people running away from the monsters this time, so let's help them by fighting, shall we?"

Giving an arbitrary reason, I suggested that we do battle, and everyone promptly agreed.

"Of course, if I wasn't with you, you'd prioritize your own safety and run away, all right?" I added, just to be safe.

We went back down the corridor a bit to prepare for battle in an area with lots of rubble and raised ground that would make it easy to fight large amounts of enemies.

If the great hall were a river, it would be like we set up camp on a sandbank about ten feet high.

The part of the ground that would be on the bottom of the river was rife with rubble, making it difficult to run. On top of that, the only way to get up to us would be to climb a nearly vertical wall or go to a slope in the opposite direction of where the maze ants were coming from.

The only problems were that it was difficult to see farther than a hundred and fifty feet or so into the distance because of the bends in the great hall, and since there were fleeing explorers, we couldn't set any traps on their path.

I thought about using Earth Magic to make a better battlefield, but the labyrinth floor seemed resistant to Earth Magic for some reason, so I decided not to push it.

"Oops, I almost forgot."

I cast Enchant: Physical Protection on all my companions.

Weak enemies or no, it was always better to be safe.

"Comiiing?"

"They're here, sir!"

A party of two rabbitfolk and a ratfolk came dashing from the other side of the great hall.

Though they weren't visible yet, there was also a party of human males behind them and a party of human women bringing up the rear.

"Run for it!"

"Hey, there's a swarm of maze ants coming this way!"

"If you don't wanna get eaten, you better quit standing around and get outta here!"

The beastfolk party, Swift Arrow, shouted warnings as they raced past us. They were all warriors, ranging in level from 7 to 10.

"Master, the next group is here, I report."

Next to arrive was the male human party: three explorers and two bag carriers.

The leader of the explorers was level 13, while the other two were level 10. The bag carriers had good constitutions, but they were only around level 4.

"Come on, slaves! Don't drop those jars of ant nectar!"

The leader, who had bandages wrapped around his limbs and neck, looked over his shoulder to shout at the two bag carriers. I guess they were his slaves.

"If you drop any, I'll cut off your arms and feed 'em to the ants!"

Without responding to their master's cruel threat, the two slaves silently followed the man.

"Besso, the Lovely Wings are falling behind."

"Hmph. I hate to lose Jena, but as long as we make it out with two jars, we won't be in the red."

"Good point. Let's make a break for it while they're getting eaten."

The pair ran past us as they held this nasty little conversation, barely sparing us a glance.

Unlike the beastfolk party, they didn't give us a word of warning.

Finally, sometime after the first two groups, the female human party arrived. It was a group of four, with two explorers and two bag carriers.

The bag carriers were in ordinary clothing with carrying boxes on their backs, but the two explorers had woven vests with bone armor, wooden shields, and short spears with bronze spearheads.

Under the women's vests were short shirts that exposed their midriffs, and their slender legs were clad in tight pants.

The glimpse of a tan line just above their ankles was sexy, too.

I didn't know how they tanned when they worked in a dark labyrinth, but sexy is sexy.

By my standards, they were just wearing sporty outfits, but in the eyes of the Shiga Kingdom, I'd imagine they were practically half-naked.

"Master, the monsters!"

"They're going to catch up to those ladies!"

Arisa and Lulu pointed at the maze ants closing in on the women.

One of the bag carriers seemed to have an injured leg, and the other one was helping her along, so they were just barely staying ahead of their pursuers.

"Oh no! At this distance they'd get caught up in my spell..."

"Mrrr."

"I can't get a clear shot with the Magic Gun, either."

The rearguard girls bit their lips helplessly.

Behind the two bag carriers, one of the nearly human-size maze ants was about to catch up.

Because it looked like it might catch the women before my party could intervene, I used my Practical Magic spell Magic Hand to grab the closest ant's leg and pull it to the ground.

Really, this spell was more like magical telekinesis.

At any rate, the fleeing party was safe for now.

“You there! Run away! The maze ants are on a chain rampage!” shouted one of the explorers from afar.

She was a slender woman in her early twenties, though she had a boyish voice. I wouldn’t quite call her beautiful, but her features definitely had a certain charm.

The other woman looked a little younger than the charming one and was a total beauty, with her black hair tied back in a neat ponytail.

The charming one was named Iruna, while the beauty was named Jena.

“Do you have a smoke bomb or a flash bomb? They’re catching up to us!”

“Sorry, I don’t!” I called back.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have any items like the ones she was asking for.

I could probably use a Fireworks spell or something instead, but at that point it’d be easier just to wipe them all out with Remote Arrows.

“Miss Iruna!”

Turning around, the explorers gasped when they saw the two bag carriers about to be caught by the ants.

“Help us! The ants! The ants!”

“Big Sister, forget about me—just save yourself!”

As the two bag carriers gave a touching display of sisterly love, nearly thirty maze ants closed in on them.

Flailing on the ground a good distance behind was the one I’d brought down.

“Master?”

“Just a little longer...”

Liza was eager to help them, but I had her wait just another moment.

There, the line of sight opened up!

“Now! Begin the battle!”

“Hi-yaaa?”

“Haaah, sir!”

Tama and Pochi reacted immediately, flinging the stones in their hands.

The stones smacked squarely into the maze ants that were about to try taking a bite out of the bag-carrier sisters.

“Nana, use ‘Taunt’!”

“You idiotic worker ants! Go work until you are bald from stress, I declare!”

Nana’s “Taunt” worked, redirecting the ants’ aggression toward her.

...That was all well and good, but she didn’t need to touch on such a sensitive topic.

“.....■■■ **Water Hold** Mizu Shibaru!”

“Secret Ultra Dimension Snare!”

Mia’s magic and Arisa’s magic activated in unison, sending the charging maze ants tumbling to the ground.

I believe Arisa’s spell was called Dimension Snare, so the “Secret Ultra” part was probably her just getting carried away in the moment.

“Here I go!”

Lulu’s Thunder Rod sent an electric shock rippling through all the ants that had gotten soaked by Mia’s spell.

“Magic...users?”

I heard one of the rescued female explorers murmur in wonder.

“Tama, Pochi, let’s go.”

“Gotchaaa?”

“Roger that, sir!”

Liza charged forward, her Magic Spear leaving red traces in the air. It was amazing to watch her beat down the ants as if the spear were an extension of her body.

Tama channeled magic power into her two Magic Swords, taking down ants with dance-like movements. Against a large number of weak enemies, her two-

sword style had the fastest rate of extermination.

Pochi, too, seemed to have gotten the hang of channeling magic into her sword; she moved with certainty, jabbing her weapon into the gaps in the maze ants' carapaces.

"The best defense is a good offense, I declare."

As her "Taunt" lured the ants toward her, Nana wiped them out, bashing them with her large shield and striking with her Soft Stun-infused Magic Sword.

She was making efficient use of the superhuman strength she gained from "Body Strengthening," prioritizing pushing the ants back or disabling them over defeating them.

She must have learned these strategic movements from the elf teachers in Bolenan Forest.

At levels 4 through 6, the maze ants didn't hold a candle to my group.

"Should we go help them...?"

"Amazing. They're defeating those tough maze ants so easily."

I heard impressed murmurs from the female explorer pair. At first, they looked like they were going to join the fray with Liza and the others, but then they stopped and stood back.



They must have judged that they would only get in the way.

“Maybe that flash of magic before weakened the ants’ defenses.”

Lulu’s Thunder Rod’s mob suppression mode must have looked like a spell to them.

“Thank you, Sir Noble.”

The charming-looking woman, who seemed to be the leader, addressed me.

We were still in the middle of battle, but that was fine, because it wasn’t like I was doing much.

However, it was difficult to talk while looking down at them, so I jumped to their level.

The beauty was tending to the younger bag-carrier sister who’d hurt her leg.

The older sister was trying to catch her breath, her hands and knees on the ground. The luggage on her back must be heavy.

The beauty had the “Emergency Treatment” skill; a potion would be necessary.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Could I ask you something, though?”

“O-of course we’ll pay you for your troubles as soon as we get back to town.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I was just wondering: How did you know I was a noble?”

It seemed strange to me that the people I met in Labyrinth City all immediately identified me as a noble and not as a merchant.

Unlike the time at the Sutoandell bar, I wasn’t wearing cologne, a wrinkle-free shirt, or anything like that.

It’d be one thing if we were on a ship or carriage with a family crest, but that obviously wasn’t the case here.

“Erm, well...”

Though she seemed a little flustered, the charming woman answered my question nevertheless.

“You’re wearing a top-quality robe in a labyrinth...”

I see. So my clothes are the problem?

I figured magic users would wear robes, too, though.

“Not to mention, you’ve got that expensive-looking sword at your waist.”

I made a point of making simple, cute scabbards for the girls’ Magic Swords, but I had forgotten to make a plain-looking scabbard for myself.

Or maybe it was the combination of the robe and the sword that was the problem.

“Besides...”

There’s still more...?

“Only a noble would be ecc—er, *confident* enough to bring a group of young ladies in dresses and even a maid into a labyrinth.”

She was definitely about to say *eccentric*.

Ahhh, now I get it.

I guess nobody but a noble would do something as “eccentric” as bringing a bunch of girls in dresses and maid outfits along into a labyrinth.

The rear guard’s dress armor had higher defense than the metal armor worn by knights, but you couldn’t tell that just by looking at it.

While we were having this silly conversation, the rest of my group had all but wiped out the enemy.

The 304 maze ants had been reduced to only ten or so.

Partway through, Nana’s “Taunt” had run out, and the ants had started to surround Tama and Pochi, but Arisa and Mia provided cover for them with magic.

“Tama! I made a wall on your left, so fight them off from the right!”

Arisa’s Deracinator spell was proving particularly useful.

With the advanced version, Mazemaker, the user could create a maze of Deracinator walls to entrap the enemy or release them on a whim.

It took a lot of magic power, but I'd told her to give it a try once the last of the maze ants caught up.

The final group of ants wouldn't arrive for another ten minutes or so, but a lesser group of maze ants was getting closer in one of the small monster passages next to the main hall. It was a group of ten or so.

"The hand you hold your fork with is your right hand!" Arisa called out to her when Tama didn't seem to know her left from her right.

"Aye-aaaye!"

That might not sound right, but when Tama and Pochi ate, they held a fork in their right hand and a spoon in their left instead of a knife and fork, so Arisa's statement was correct.

"Amazing. Such a hectic battle, but nobody's injured at all."

"Huh? Seriously?"

The female explorers watched my group fight in amazement.

The vanguard had taken a few hits from the maze ants, but between their overpowered armor and my Enchant: Physical Protection, they hadn't actually been hurt.

"Wow, you're right. They must be garnet-badge explorers."

The charming one misunderstood, but I couldn't tell her *actually, we're wood-badge explorers* when she was gazing at us with admiration like that.

"Rustle-ruuustle?"

"I hear something behind the wall, sir!"

Tama and Pochi had detected the maze ants approaching in the adjacent passage.

I was impressed that they noticed in the middle of such an intense battle.

"Satou, sign stone."

Mia pointed down from the higher level, and I saw that the sign stone, which had been glowing blue in response to the bag-carrier sisters, was now alternating between blue and red.

It seemed to be detecting the enemies in the other passageway.

“Sir Noble! That’s a sign that a spawnhole is about to open up. Monsters are going to come out from over there!” the charming woman exclaimed.

The wall, which had looked like stone, thinned into a sort of membrane before a small hole opened in the middle.

“Oh dear.”

A maze ant burst out, threatening to go after the bag-carrier sisters, and I stepped between them in an instant.

Pulling out my sword from its scabbard, I sliced the ant clean in two.

I had to make sure to hold back, lest I cut into the stone floor as well.

“I-incredible...”

“What a beautiful sword.”

The explorer ladies were staring at me in amazement.

The bag-carrier sisters, meanwhile, retreated over to the explorers.

Hmm? What’s that?

There appeared to be a “spawnhole” forming behind the explorer party, too.

They didn’t seem to have noticed, so I called out a warning. “Behind you!”

“Huh? Another spawnhole? Let’s do this, Jena.”

“W-wait a second! Something’s wrong!”

Instead of maze ants, a single soldier mantis started forcing its way out through the narrow hole that had formed near the explorer duo.

This must be the “rogue” that Jekeh from the Red Ice party warned us about before we entered the labyrinth.

Unlike a normal praying mantis, the soldier mantis had six back legs and four front legs. Two of the front legs were small, for grabbing prey, while two of them were large and shaped like blades for battle.

The creature was about eight feet tall—definitely intimidating.

“““Eeeeeek!”””

Realizing what had emerged, the four women all shrieked in unison.

The beauty dropped her spear in shock, and the charmer even fell to her knees.

I couldn't blame the Lovely Wings explorer party for their reactions. Iruna, the charming one, was level 6, and Jena, the beauty, was level 8, so this level-16 soldier mantis was a powerful threat to them.

If I was to make a modern-life comparison, it would be like if you poked at a bush thinking there was a dog behind it, only to have a giant brown bear jump out instead.

KUWKUWAAAAMWA.

The soldier mantis hadn't made its way out of the hole yet, but it still unleashed a howl as if in mockery of the frightened group of four.

“R-run away, you two!”

“W-we'll slow it down! Get out of here, quick!”

The two explorer women put on determined expressions through their tears.

Gripping their spears with shaking hands, they stepped forward, ready to buy time so that the bag-carrier sisters could escape.

I had to admire their spirit, but there was no way they stood a chance against this thing.

The last ant finally made its way out of the spawnhole in front of me, so I cut it down and hurried over to the female explorers.

“Sorry, but I'll take this one.”

With that, I raised my fairy sword and blocked the soldier mantis's swinging blades.

KUWKUWAAAAMWA.

As the mantis howled again, I brandished my fairy sword toward its head.

I'd finally gotten the hang of not using “Spellblade” by mistake.

“L-let us help you!”

“We—we can at least create a d-diversion!”

The female explorers stood shakily on either side of me.

I appreciated the offer, but the fight was already over.

A black shadow fell over the female explorers, causing them to take a step back.

“Huh?”

“No way!”

The mantis’s head rolled across the floor, eliciting another small scream from the two women.

The soldier mantis’s body fell to the floor, spurting a puddle of green blood.

“Did you attack it just now?”

“You’re incredible, Sir Noble!”

Feeling a little bashful as the two explorers stared at me as if they were looking at a hero, I turned to check on the rest of my group.

It looked like their battle was almost over, too.

“S-Sir Noble, you’ve saved our lives twice now.”

“““Thank you so much.”””

The explorers and bag carriers all thanked me in turn.

“I’ve never seen such amazing swordsmanship.”

“Neither have I. Garnet-badge explorers are truly on another level.”

I felt like I might have gone a little too far, but this was normal for a level-30 mithril-sword user. I was probably fine.

I responded to their thanks with a light wave of the hand, then went over to Liza and the others.

“Master, shall we begin collecting materials?”

“Just the cores are fine. The ants’ carapaces are brittle, so they wouldn’t be

very useful.”

“Master, forgive my insolence, but...” Liza voiced a rare disagreement. “I believe the carapaces could serve as material for armor and shields. The claws of the maze ants’ front legs are said to be useful for short swords, sickles, and so on.”

In Liza’s homeland, she explained, ant-type monsters were highly valued for their materials.

The shell of a maze ant could be broken by an ordinary bronze sword, but it was probably still sturdier than armor made of goblin bones. If they were potentially useful, it could be a good idea to bring them aboveground.

I didn’t care much about making more money, but it might be helpful for some newbie explorers.

“Meeeat?”

“We’re not going to grill the meat, sir?”

Having retrieved the cores from the dead maze ants, Tama and Pochi wanted to know if they should break down the meat, too.

“It would be best not to. Ant meat is so bitter that few people choose to eat it. Besides, if a child eats it, they could get food poisoning.”

I certainly didn’t want to give anyone food poisoning. Tama and Pochi seemed disappointed, but I had plenty of meat in Storage that I could cook for them later, so they would have to make do with baked goods and water for now.

“Sir Noble, here.”

Iruna, the charming female explorer, handed me some monster cores.

She had retrieved them from the maze ants I defeated. The soldier mantis was still untouched, though—maybe she didn’t want to go near it.

“Thank you.”

“It’s hardly enough to thank you for saving our lives, but we would be happy to help break down the corpses.”

It was kind of Jena to offer, but I couldn’t take her up on that.

“Actually, you should probably make a run for it. My friends here have detected with magic another swarm of maze ants headed this way. They’ll get here before too long.”

“You’re not going to run, Sir Noble?”

“We’ll slow them down for a bit first.”

I was trying to politely imply that it would be best for us if they ran away quickly.

“All right. Make sure you stay safe, okay?”

“We’ll definitely pay you back for today!”

Finally, the female explorers and their bag carriers got up to flee.

As they gathered their things, I noticed a jar of ant nectar in the elder sister’s box. Maybe that was what the maze ants were after.

“Master, the next wave will be here soon.”

“All right. I’ll recharge your magic.”

I used the Mana Transfer spell to restore the group’s magic power.

No one was injured, so I simply recast Enchant: Physical Protection on all of them.

“They’re here!”

After that, we fought several more rounds of maze ants. Once we’d beaten most of them, we decided to go into their nest.

Inside, we acquired materials like ant nectar, queen ant nectar spheres, and even naturally fermented ant nectar mead, but that’s another story.

Incidentally, the small group of maze ants that didn’t come toward us pursued the man called Besso and his explorer party instead.

Fortunately, nobody was killed, but they were severely injured when they made it to the labyrinth army’s encampment.

If I remembered correctly, leading a chain rampage to that area was considered a crime.

I took a little moment of silence for the grim fate that might await them.

[The Unforgiving Labyrinth](#)

Satou here. In the dungeon-crawler games I used to play, you sometimes had to survive without eating meat from monsters. I distinctly remember getting so focused on finding food that I forgot about trying to beat the game.

“Hopping potatoooes?”

“There are walking beans over here, sir.”

Tama and Pochi were defeating the monsters that roamed the passageway.

Both types were weak level-1 monsters whose only means of attack was a body slam. The pair made pretty quick work of them.

After we wiped out the nest of the maze ants who’d been chasing the Lovely Wings, we found a shortcut to the next area inside.

We’d initially planned to come back the same day, but once we made that discovery, there was a change of plans.

Competing for monsters was a pain, and fighting while trying to conceal from other explorers our fancy equipment and my support abilities was stressful, so we decided to go to the less populated area we found instead.

When we reached area 9, we found endless traps as well as slimes and small insect monsters with “Poison,” “Plague,” and “Paralysis” attacks, but we used the Everyday Magic spell Bug Wiper to breeze right past them.

Our current location, area 9-4-1—which is a pain to say, so let’s just stick with 9-1—could be accessed only by the aforementioned maze of connections. Naturally, we were the only explorers there.

There was a fair amount of explorers near the regular entrance to area 9, but it seemed like people rarely came in this far.

As evidence of that, there was only around a fifth of the amount of sign stones that there had been in the other areas.

Not that it mattered to us, since we could return to area 1 in an instant using the seal slate we had placed there.

“These monster cores are white.”

“They’re very small, too.”

Liza and Lulu broke down the walking beans and hopping potatoes, producing white cores that were only around the size of a pill.

“White ones like that aren’t really useful, so you don’t need to go out of your way to collect them.”

With that, I put the monster corpses away in Storage.

These guys must be the real source of the incredibly gross beans and potatoes we ate before we entered the labyrinth. There were many more of them in area 2, from what I could tell.

Incidentally, if you used Treespirit Pearls to remove the dark-red sinews that caused the gross bitterness, they would taste like normal potatoes and beans.

“It’s shiniing?”

“Tama, if you could.”

“Aaaye!”

Being careful of traps, Tama went up ahead to scout out a moss-filled cavern.

Beyond this point was the large space that contained the areamaster of area 9-1.

“There’s a foreeest?”

...A forest?

Curious, I followed Tama’s beckoning.

“It certainly is a forest.”

The cavern was big enough that you could fit three Tokyo Domes inside and entirely full of trees and shrubs, with light cascading down from above.

The source of the light was the plants dangling from the ceiling.

When I’d cut one of these roots in the room before this one, it had looked like optical fiber on the inside. No doubt the roots and stalks absorbed natural light and gave it off like optical fibers.

There was grass growing from the earth below our feet, too, so it didn't feel like we were underground at all.

"This is so much bigger than the room we beat before," Arisa murmured, gazing around.

The path we'd been on led to the top of the large room, and we could look down at the forest from here.

"There's even a river."

There had been water trickling from the walls in one of the earlier rooms, but this room had a small river and even a lake.

"Mrrr. Freakish," Mia grumbled, brow furrowed as she stared down at the forest.

Mostly plant-type monsters roamed this area. It was no wonder she didn't like it.

"The flowers in the center are pretty, I declare."

"They look like orchids. The glowing flowers are moving around, though. Is that a monster, too?"

Nana and Arisa were gazing at an enormous plant monster in the center of the room.

"That's right. It even has the areamaster title."

The creature was a crazy dendrobium; it was level 53 and used Light Magic.

On the hill it was growing on, there were also ten or so related monsters called "mayhem dendrobiums," which were around level 40.

Attracted by the smell of the flowers, bug-type monsters were flying around the plants, only to occasionally be brought down by bullets of light from the flowers.

Once the monsters hit the ground, the dendrobium monsters grabbed them with vines and dragged them down to their roots.

"Maybe I should thin those out a little."

These monsters were too strong to use for leveling up the rest of my group.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t get hurt!”

I waved reassuringly at my concerned comrades and took off into the air.

When I approached closely, the crazy dendrobium’s flowers glowed, and each of them fired a light bullet at me. Its spawn, the mayhem dendrobiums, made an annoying noise as they sprayed more light bullets everywhere.

Huh, that’s pretty.

Enjoying the light show, I changed direction in midair just in time to avoid getting hit.

But as they started to fly past me, the light bullets quickly zipped around to follow me instead.

“Ah, they’re the homing kind, huh?”

Because the light bullets created a beautiful arc of light as they changed trajectories, I wound up playing a bit of tag with them.

When the rest of my group started applauding, I gave them a wave.

“...Is this the face?”

Near the roots of the treelike creature was a knot that resembled a face.

It looked like a weak point to me, so I dispersed the light bullets chasing me with the Practical Magic spell Dispel Magic and used “Flashrunning” to close the distance between the face knot and me.

YWOWNLLEUAAAAAMN.

Sensing danger, the crazy dendrobium started gathering light in its flowers, but it was too late.

I created “Spellblade” on the end of my fairy sword and sliced right through its one-hundred-foot-wide trunk.

The monster’s health went down at a remarkable rate.

YWGOWNLLBUEAMN.

In its final struggle, it unleashed a bunch of red vines from its face knot, but

they were blocked by the Practical Magic Flexible Shields in front of me, so they had no effect beyond creating a bit of noise.

Finally, the crazy dendrobium's health ran out, and the vines fell lifeless to the ground.

> **Title Acquired: Areamaster Slayer** “Better grab the loot,” I muttered, putting the monster's upper half into Storage before it could hit the ground.

“Wait, what's that?”

I saw something shining inside the face knot.

According to my AR display, it was a **Brightlight Pearl** soul.

“Looks like a pretty rare material.”

With this, I could probably even make a light rod that shot lasers.

Grinning smugly, I collected the item, then used the Earth Magic spell Pitfall to expose the roots so I could collect the monster's lower half, too.

Normally, Earth Magic didn't work inside the labyrinth, but fortunately, it seemed to be fine when the ground was bare dirt.

“...Is that a treasure chest?”

At the bottom of the pit, near the center of the roots, there was a giant treasure chest.

I didn't think the crazy dendrobium would bother hiding a treasure chest, so either it was always there to begin with or a mischievous labyrinth master put it there.

When my trap senses reacted suddenly, I touched it with Magic Hand to put it in Storage, then took out the contents without the chest.

There was one lesser elixir and five cure-alls, as well as several intermediate potions, but all the latter had deteriorated and lost their effects.

According to the materials I'd gathered in the elf village, a cure-all was like a lesser version of an elixir.

Despite being “lesser,” it was an excellent item that could cure poison, illness,

petrification, paralysis, and other such status effects, as well as even helping to restore lost limbs.

The lesser elixir could heal things that the cure-alls couldn't, like curses and severe status conditions.

Aside from all the potions, there was also a large Magic Sword with the light attribute, but its stats weren't as good as the Magic Swords Tama and Pochi used, making it of no use in combat.

The Magic Light Sword looked a little old-fashioned, but it was the kind of elegant design that nobles would enjoy, so I decided to stash it as a possible gift.

"All right, inspection complete."

The mayhem dendrobiums couldn't move. I simply destroyed them at my leisure, collected the light stone souls from their face knots, and went back to the others.

Unfortunately, there were no treasure boxes under the mayhem dendrobiums.

"That was kind of like watching the PV for a sci-fi anime or a bullet hell game."

Once I got back, Arisa gave me a strange review of my fight against the areamaster.

The other kids all gave me normal praise, of course.

"Okay, I'll pick up the first round of enemies and bring them out here."

In the area right after the large cavern, there was a lot of conveniently level ground, so I used Earth Magic and Practical Magic to create a simple encampment.

It wasn't nearly as sturdy as the built-in defenses on the flying ship that we traveled the southern seas with, but it should be fine for dealing with normal monsters.

Besides, even if it did break, I could just rebuild it with magic.

"Let's do this thing! Same-strength enemies for now, plz!"

Acknowledging Arisa's somewhat dated gaming lingo with a wave of the hand, I aggroed some monsters with Magic Hand and led them over to where my group was waiting.

"Let's start with these vanilla stalkers. 'Biting' and 'Vine-grabbing' are their only attacks, but they're level twenty-three. Don't let your guards down."

The first enemies I led over were leafy creatures with vanilla-scented flowers that had fanged mouths inside.

Some of them had the special ability Charm Person, despite not looking any different from the others, so we had to proceed with caution.

"...  ***Paralyze Mist Mahimu.***"

"You are quite impudent for mere shrubs, I declare."

Mia's Water Magic hindered the plants' movements, Nana drew their attention with "Taunt," and the beastfolk girls closed in for the kill.

...Oh?

It was only for a moment, but I saw the red light of "Spellblade" appear on Pochi's sword.

As I continued watching the girls battle, I saw the same thing happen with Tama's Magic Swords, too.

At this rate, if they kept leveling up, the two of them might get the "Spellblade" skill like Liza pretty soon.

That day, we continued fighting monsters until evening, then spent the night in a safe house I made inside the labyrinth.



After that, we spent days battling and sleeping in the labyrinth, until it was the day before our scheduled return.

"Preeey?"

Tama came up to the rest of the group encamped on the hill, leading a monster.

True to its name, walking corn, the monster looked like a cornstalk with insect

legs. It was surprisingly fast.

Not only that...

“Tama, behind you! Sir!”

...it turned its kernels into cone shapes and started shooting them at Tama like machine guns.

“Whoosh, whooooosh?”

Tama used “Blink” to dodge the barrage of corn, but the monster stood in place and continued shooting at her.

“Plants should not move, I declare!”

Nana shouted via “Taunt,” attracting the walking corn’s attention.

The corn went flying toward the encampment, but Nana blocked it with her buckler and Flexible Shields.

The onslaught pushed Nana back, the spikes on her shoes digging into the ground.

Next to her, I saw a rock get hit by the corn and break into pieces.

If anyone got hit, that could actually cause a serious injury.

Meanwhile, I was using Magic Hand to catch every piece of corn that flew past the encampment and put it away in Storage.

While the shell of the walking corn’s kernels was hard enough to break a rock, the inside was perfectly edible.

It was almost snack time, so I figured I could make something with the corn.

Using my “Parallel Thoughts” skill, I kept watching over my group’s fight as I started getting ready to cook.

“This walking corn is level twenty-seven! It’s just a normal one with no magic! We’ll hold on until it runs out of corn, then counterattack!”

Arisa called out the information she’d found with Status Check to the rest of the crew.

Even if they looked the same, monsters with levels in the high 20s could have

special variations, like magic attacks or a barrier.

I wished they were at least a different color or something, like in games.

“Take this!”

From behind Nana, Lulu fired with her Fireburst Gun, the Flame Bullets hitting the corn and causing it to explode with a *pop*.

The Fireburst Gun was a new weapon I’d created, a kind of flame rod using one of the Firelight Pearls I found on the fire-breathing island where I fought the Flame Lord.

A normal Thunder Rod Gun or Fire Rod Gun wouldn’t be strong enough to fight an enemy of this level, which was why I prepared this upgrade.

It had a similar level of power to the kind of Magic Cannon that might be at a fort, though, so it couldn’t be used in front of others.

“Let’s bring this sucker down! Mia, Paralyze Water Hold, plz!”

“Mm. ■■■...”

Arisa was keeping a close eye on things, giving the group orders.

“Nana! I’m going to make a barrier so you can set up some new Flexible Shields, okay?”

“Understood, I report.”

The transparent barrier Arisa made blocked the walking corn’s barrage.

Once Nana had finished resetting her Flexible Shields, Arisa immediately took down her barrier. The Barrier Magic’s defense power was high, but it cost a great deal of magic power, so it wasn’t practical for regular use.

Finally, when the monster ran out of corn to shoot, its tip split into four and grew fangs, creating a giant mouth.

The walking corn charged forward, trying to swallow Nana whole.

“Yah!”

As soon as it opened its mouth and exposed its weak point, Lulu fired her Fireburst Gun, shooting right into the monster’s gullet.

“...■■■ **Paralyze Water Hold** Mahi Mizu Shibaru.”

Then Mia’s Water Magic activated, destroying the corn monster’s momentum and slamming it onto the ground.

This spell was an intermediate Water Magic spell with the effects of both Paralyze Mist and Water Hold. It didn’t have wide range like Paralyze Mist, but it was useful for lone enemies, since there was no risk of your allies getting caught up in the mix.

““Super Dimensional Ultra Attack’!”

Arisa shouted some nonsensical phrase as she fired a Dimension Cutter spell at the immobilized walking corn.

Invisible blades slashed away at the walking corn, but they were so sharp that it actually didn’t do much damage.

Plant monsters tended to be particularly tough.

“Tama, Pochi, time to attack! Let’s finish it off.”

““Spellblaaaade’?”

“Gooo, sir!”

Activating “Spellblade” on their Magic Swords, Tama and Pochi jumped out from behind Nana along with Liza, leaping into close combat with the walking corn.

In these past few days, Tama had learned how to use “Spellblade” first, followed by Pochi when she leveled up earlier that day and finally gained the skill.

Their blades flashing red, the two of them cut through the walking corn’s legs.

Since they were still new to “Spellblade,” the light was unstable, and it consumed a lot of MP.

The walking corn lashed its vines around like whips, which the vanguard quickly blocked.

For a while, the battle seemed evenly matched, but soon the balance tipped in my group’s favor.

“This is the end of the line!”

Liza readied her spear with a steady red light at the end.

“‘Helix Spear Attack’!”

The “Spellblade” spun sharply as she jabbed it into the walking corn, stabbing through it.

CWUOOOORWNN.

A strange death cry unleashed itself from the corn monster’s fanged mouth.

The “Spellblade” around the spear spun in a helix shape, shredding the creature’s body.

Liza’s “Helix Spear Attack” was a simplified version of the “Triple Helix Spear Attack” I learned in my battle against the Golden Boar Lord.

These special move-type skills tended to cost a lot of skill points, so they seemed kind of wasteful, but they were far stronger than a normal attack, making it worth having a few.

At the minimum, I wanted each of my kids to have at least one.

CWUOOOORWNN.

With another dying cry, the creature whipped its vines around.

Plant-type monsters were tough, all right.

“Sleep, I declare.”

Nana’s “Body Strengthening”—enhanced shield bash hit the gigantic walking corn, sending it flying backward.

“And just to be sure, here’s a Dimension Pile, max strength!”

Arisa’s Space Magic closed in on the unmoving walking corn, finally finishing off the stubborn creature.

“We wiiin?”

“Sir!”

As everyone let out a cheer of triumph, I sanitized their injuries with Everyday Magic before using the intermediate Water Magic spell Healing: Water to

restore all of them.

During battle, Mia was in charge of healing, but I took care of it when the fight was over.

“Yesss! Awesome! I just hit level twenty-nine!” Arisa cheered.

“Greeeat?”

“Hooray, sir!”

“Don’t get too full of yourselves. We were only able to come this far because of master, remember.”

“Affirmative. Thank you, master, I report.”

“Well, of course I’m grateful. Tama does the monster pulling now, but master was doing all of it up until yesterday.”

That was uncharacteristically big of Arisa— “It was pretty amazing. He didn’t pull any other monsters, and there was always an ideal enemy right after a break—really, nerds are so efficient.”

Ah. I should’ve known there would be a punch line.

“Look who’s talking,” I said blandly, bopping Arisa on the head and looking around at the others.

They’d all used up quite a bit of magic power, so I used Mana Transfer to restore each of them in turn.

Tama had already gone off to find a new enemy. I’d have to heal her once she got back.

“At this rate, I might hit level thirty before the end of the day.”

Because area 9-1 had a lot of strong enemies, the girls had been leveling up pretty effectively.

This part of the area had a lot of plant monsters, which was why I mistook it for a forest at first.

“Sorryyy?”

“No worries!”

Tama was being followed by two monsters this time: a thornfoot, an annoying ivy monster that could sap magic power, and a capture slime, an insect-eating plant monster that crawled along with sticky tentacles. She must have accidentally pulled both when trying to grab only one.

“Nana, deal with the capture slime for a while, please!”

“You should try being cute like a snail, I declare!”

Nana’s “Taunt” skill had leveled up so that she could now use it on specific targets.

“Let’s bring down the thornfoot first! Make sure you don’t get caught in its ivy, or it’ll suck up your magic!”

“Understood!”

“Yes, sir.”

Liza and Tama kept the thornfoot in check while Pochi served as a secondary tank.

My Enchant: Physical Protection spell hadn’t worn off, but magic was being stolen from the beastfolk girls’ weapons.

“Emergencyyy?”

“Geh, a third one! It’s a fire maple!”

Waving its burning branches around, the fire maple came along on wriggling roots.

“I’ll use Mazemaker to buy some time. Thornfoot first, then the capture slime, then the fire maple last!”

Arisa used Space Magic to create a maze of invisible Deracinator walls around the fire maple.

Some of its branches jutted out from the maze, flinging flaming leaves like *shuriken*.

There was a bit too much going on for the group to fend them all off, so I used my Magic Hand to catch the leaves and put them in Storage.

“Thanks, master!”

I waved at Arisa, then took out one of the still-burning leaves and looked at it.

Oh, I know.

I decided to use the flaming leaf to continue what I'd been working on this whole time.

"The thornfoot's down to forty percent of its health!"

"Mm. Got it."

"Let's bring it down!"

Quickly defeating the thornfoot, the rest of the group went to help Nana, who'd been fighting the capture slime alone.

"Arisa, the fire maple's almost out."

"Uh-oh! Thank you, master."

Arisa hurriedly recast her Space Magic spell.

This seemed to use up the last of her magic, so she pulled a vial out of the pouch at her waist to throw back a Mana Recovery Potion.

Before long, my group had overcome the emergency and defeated all three enemies.

"Smells goooood?"

"What're you making, sir?"

Once the battle was over, Pochi came running up to me, her tail wagging. Tama rushed over, too, her eyes narrowing as she sniffed the air.

"Hmm? Well, the walking corn's kernels reminded me of something, so I decided to make pancakes."

I'd used the Everyday Magic spell Dry to suck all the moisture out of the corn, ground it down with a mortar using my own original spell Multitool, then used the resulting flour to make pancakes.

This was a recipe a classmate who was allergic to wheat flour had taught me in my school days.

"Geez, I wish you'd stop cooking near us while we're in the middle of a fight. I

thought my stomach was gonna start growling.”

“Mm, it did.”

“Good work.”

Ignoring Arisa’s complaints, I transferred the freshly made pancakes to a board.

Then I cut them into smaller pieces and put some maple syrup on top before giving them to everyone as a little snack.

I’d harvested the maple syrup from a monster similar to the fire maple the group just fought.

“Yummyyy.”

“It melts in my mouth, sir!”

Tama and Pochi rejoiced at the sweetness.

“More maple syrup, please.”

“Mm, more.”

“Don’t blame me if you put on weight, you two.”

Lulu shook her head as Arisa and Mia demanded more syrup, then looked to me uncertainly.

I nodded permission. Maple syrup wasn’t too high in calories anyway, if I remembered right.

“Master, did you make these with the yellow grains from that monster?” Lulu asked.

“That’s right. I broke them down into powder, then mixed them with eggs, sugar, and so on.”

To be honest, these pancakes were made entirely with ingredients from inside the labyrinth. Tama had collected the eggs the day before, and the sugar was called “ugi sugar,” created from the bamboo of a deer-shaped plant creature.

Watching contentedly as the girls enjoyed their pancakes, I took a bite for

myself.

Since I didn't have any baking powder or baking soda, they weren't quite as fluffy as I would have liked, but the taste was perfectly good.

Hmm?

Nana was staring intently at the baby chick design I'd imprinted on her pancake.

"Master, this design is wonderful, I report. We must protect it, I recommend."

I'd burned the design onto the pancake in a fit of playfulness, but she seemed to like it, maybe a little too much.

"I can make it again for you anytime, so please eat that one before it gets cold."

"Yes, master."

I'd made the mark using the Multitool spell and a leaf from the fire maple. It really wasn't much work at all.

For the other kids, I also made paw print marks, rabbit marks, and so on.

Tama and Pochi still looked hungry, so I cut the rest of mine in half to give to them.

When I beckoned, they trotted over and opened their mouths wide like baby birds. I popped the big pancake slices into their mouths.

"Tastyyy?"

"Delicious, sir."

Mia and Arisa opened their mouths, too, but because my plate was empty, I gave them candy instead.

If I had known these were going to be so popular, I would've made a bit more corn flour.

Incidentally, this candy was a by-product of making the nectar of the mayhem dendrobiums into orchid mead.

I'd gotten these recipes from Trazayuya's materials, too.

Clearly he had been a gourmet-loving elf.

“Once we’ve rested for a bit, we should move on.”

“Yeah, the only monsters left around here are trash,” Arisa agreed.

The reason we were able to have such a carefree time cooking and eating in the labyrinth was because there weren’t many enemies around.

We’d hunted just about all of them over the past few days, so the fire maple from earlier was the last one left in the large cavern that might randomly attack us.

I know it sounds like the kind of thing that could get us into trouble with environmental conservation groups, but the monsters in a labyrinth are apparently made by the labyrinth master using a Labyrinth Core, so there was no danger of any species going extinct.

Still, I made sure not to lay a hand on creatures like the heat haze dendrobium, which seemed to be crazy dendrobium saplings.

Once we’d wiped out all the monsters in the huge cavern, we went through each of the small rooms attached to the cavern in turn.

“That last spore attack was rather dangerous.”

“I never imagined that capsaicin bird symbiote would use its ‘Fire Magic’ to set the spores on fire.”

Standing in front of the large corpse of a dungeon fungus, Arisa and Liza wiped their brows.

The capsaicin bird was a fairly weak bird-type monster made up of red leaves, which lived on the heads of dungeon fungi. Once in a while, they would have the “Fire Magic” skill.



“That’s a pretty large dungeon fungus. Mia, would you like that for dinner again tonight?”

“Mm, please.”

Mia gazed hungrily at the dead dungeon fungus, her eyes sparkling.

“Fungus, tasty.”

Dungeon fungus steak had been Mia’s main dish for the past few days.

There were plenty of vegetables in this plant-based area, so Mia was in a better mood than usual.

“Treasure box over there...”

Tama pointed at a hollow in the corner of the fungus room.

This room was full of giant mushrooms that grew like trees. When I tried cutting one, I found that the inside past the first few inches was hard as rock. They were a kind of monster, but they showed no signs of moving.

“Ooh, finally!”

Over the past few days, we had found only three treasure boxes.

Aside from the areamaster one on the first day, the other two boxes were both duds, containing five bronze swords that looked like ancient ornaments and one big bronze mirror.

Everyone’s hopes were high as we approached this one, but...

“Bronze swords *again*? And they’re all the same kind!”

“They’re well-balanced, so they might be useful to newbie explorers for training.”

As I attempted to console the grumbling Arisa, I put the five swords away in Storage.

“It’s starting to get dark.”

“Yeah. Maybe we should head back to the vacation house.”

When nobody seemed to have any complaints, we left the danger area behind.

The group looked like they still wanted to fight more, but aside from Mia (who required a high amount of experience), the others had all reached level 30 and acquired new skills, so I figured our first labyrinth expedition was already plenty successful.

Most importantly, Liza gained the special attack skill “Helix Spear Attack,” Tama and Pochi gained “Spellblade,” and Lulu gained Practical Magic and Everyday Magic.

The only Practical Magic spell she could use so far was the beginner spell Mana Light, but she was already on her way to mastering Everyday Magic.

Lulu said she was hoping to learn to use the Practical Magic spells Cube and Floating Board soon, too.

She wanted to use the former as a hygienic cutting board and the latter for transporting ingredients. How very like Lulu.

Mia and Nana hadn’t gained any particularly notable skills, but Mia’s Spirit Magic abilities had improved: She could now make spirits of all four major elements.

As for Arisa...

“I’m definitely picking up ‘Fire Magic’! The elves said that ‘Fire Magic: Body Strengthening’ burns body fat to create energy, so it’d be perfect for dieting.”

...she had recently acquired the “Fire Magic” skill.

The night before, she’d been moaning about how she was heartbroken because it cost way too many skill points to raise Space Magic’s skill level from 8 to 9. Right now, she was having a little affair with Fire Magic.

I’d better not mention that it only cost me one point to raise my skill levels.

At present, Arisa was just about able to use advanced Space Magic, so she decided to pick up Fire Magic, since it was effective in battle and safe to use in front of people.

Incidentally, from my analysis, Fire Magic seemed to use normal magic power as fuel. The thing about body fat was probably a joke by the elves.

She seemed so excited that I didn’t have the heart to tell her, but I should

probably warn her about it before she went on a binge-eating spree.

As far as my worries about her low stamina, she said the cause was that she was greatly limited by her magic-based stats.

In Arisa's case, she could decide which points went to which stats when she leveled up, so I had her raise her physical stats like strength and stamina to the point where it wouldn't be a problem.



"We're heeere?"

"Ooopen sesameee, sir."

When Tama and Pochi spoke these words in front of the dirt wall, a passageway appeared with a low rumble.

A penguin statue arrived on a pedestal to greet us.

"We're back," Mia greeted.

"Pen!" the penguin responded.

I had made this penguin statue during the course of our stay in the dungeon; it contained the core parts of the figurehead golem that had controlled the flying ship.

The penguin golem was the doorman and maintainer of this little area.

It wouldn't open the wall for anyone but our group, so it was the perfect security.

On the small chance that anyone did manage to break in, the golem would alert me with a similar mechanism to the Practical Magic spell Signal.

Beyond the penguin was a single log cabin that we were using as our base here.

Made from tree-type monster parts, it initially consisted only of a living-slash-bedroom, but I'd been slowly expanding and improving it over the past few days.

Now it contained a living-slash-dining room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a workshop, making it feel more like a vacation house than a

base.

“Let’s wash up and go inside.”

We stopped at the little washing area just outside the cabin, cleaning the dirt off our hands and feet, then trading our shoes for indoor slippers.

“I haven’t used much magic power, so I probably don’t need to restock...”

Muttering to myself, I supplied more magic to the backup magic power storage tool on the penguin’s pedestal.

I had designed the system so that it could supply itself with magic from the labyrinth’s mana source, but I didn’t want to risk any meddling from the labyrinth master, so I usually just left it as a stand-alone device.

It could also be switched out with the figurehead golem.

“There, all done.”

With that, I looked around the cavern containing the cabin.

Next to the cabin was a field cultivated by living dolls, where we were growing tomatoes, herbs, and so on.

These living dolls were the same ones we’d used as a dummy crew on the flying ship.

The reason I chose to make this cavern the site of our base was that it had a water source, ventilation holes, and no nearby monster passages that could create a spawnhole.

There were three passages leading in and out of the cavern, but I’d blocked both ends of each passage with an earth-wall door like the one we’d just entered through.

I’d also put adamantite alloy wire mesh from one of the sunken ships across the air vents, and the walls, ceiling, and floor were all protected with purification Barrier Magic circles like the ones I set up around the city-rock island in the Seadragon Islands.

This barrier was to keep out any physical-and small bug-type monsters.

That was mostly because the first time we slept here, small bug monsters

called “bite worms” came up from the ground to attack us, attracted by our body heat.

Luckily, I was able to ward them off easily with the Everyday Magic spell Bug Wiper, but I’d decided to come up with certain precautions to prevent it from happening again.

It might be overkill, but it was all for the sake of my friends’ safety and my own sound sleep, so I decided to pull out all the stops.

“Master, the bath is all heated up.”

“All right, I’m coming.”

Since Arisa called me, I closed the lid to the magic storage device and headed over to the bath.

The kids who couldn’t cook were in charge of heating up the bathwater.

Pochi had a hard time controlling the magic tool for water heating at first, but now she was able to get it to a steady level.

“Hurry up and strip—everyone’s waiting...”

As soon as I entered the changing room, Arisa wiggled her fingers at me to urge me to hurry.

If I took too long, she’d start trying to do it herself, so I used my “Quick Change” skill to switch to only a towel wrapped around my waist.

“Grrr, you can’t cheat at bathing!”

Arisa grumbled about not getting to see me change, but I ignored her easily.

Everyone was waiting outside the large wooden bath, all clad in bathing robes. I’d made the bath by cutting up the trunk of a gigantic tree with a Holy Sword, then carving it out with the help of Arisa’s Space Magic.

They could’ve just started without me, but Liza and Nana insisted that “master must be the one to enter the bath first,” so they’d gotten into the habit of waiting for me to go in.

“Your bath awaits, master.”

“I shall rinse you first, I report.”

Liza and Nana, who had clearly taken a liking to the ritual, poured hot water over me from either side before I stepped into the hot bath.

Then I slowly lowered myself into the bathwater, allowing the perfect temperature to relax my very soul.

Aaaah, baths are the best.

Activating Spirit Vision, I raised my hand partway out of the water and examined my palm.

Spirits danced along the water that flowed through my fingers, slipping in and out.

Supposedly, spirits didn't have personalities or feelings, but the spirits in this bath seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"Lots of spirits," Mia commented.

"Are there?" Arisa asked, tilting her head.

There were, indeed, many spirits in the watering hole in this cavern. I wasn't sure if they were there to feed the monsters or if it was just a natural opening in the underground mana vein.

Either way, it might be thanks to the spirits that just submerging oneself in this water made it feel like one was getting a full-body massage.

"Okay, now that we're all warmed up, time to wash our hair."

"Aaaye."

"Yes, sir."

Tama, Pochi, and Mia stood up in the bath cheerfully.

At first, I'd been washing the other kids' hair, too, but Lulu turned so red, she looked ready to pass out, and Arisa got overexcited and nearly had a nosebleed. I had them do it themselves.

"Mm. First."

Because Mia had won the round of rock-paper-scissors, she put on a little headband to keep the shampoo out of her eyes and sat down on the little chair in the wooden bath.

I didn't want her to get a cold, so I promptly started lathering her hair with the shampooing soap and hot water. This was a recipe I'd learned from Tutoreiya, an alchemist elf in Bolenan Forest.

It wasn't quite as good as the shampoo in my old world, but it formed a better lather and was gentler on the scalp than most normal soap.

I'd made the headband for Tama and Pochi, but Mia and Nana had taken a liking to it, too.

After I washed the younger girls' hair for them, I had them warm themselves back up by counting to a hundred before getting out of the bath.

We'd been bathing together every day in the elf village. At this point, I wasn't even fazed by the sight of Nana's bathing robe when the water turned it slightly transparent.

If anything, that made me feel like I'd lost my edge a little, so I decided I would visit a red-light district sometime to get a bit of that spark back.

"Tomorrow morning, I think we should go back up to the surface for a bit."

When I said this after the bath, everyone's faces fell a little.

"Awww, let's stay until we hit level fifty!"

"I'd like to, but we're at the end of the exploration period we registered for at the labyrinth entrance, and our payment at the inn is going to run out soon, too."

I didn't think they'd suddenly sell our horses and carriages and all, but I still wanted to be safe.

"Besides, the horses will be lonely if we don't check on them once in a while, right?"

At that, Tama and Pochi exchanged looks of alarm.

They must have forgotten about their beloved horses during our days in the labyrinth.

"Let's go baaack?"

"We'd better hurry, sir!"

Tama and Pochi hopped up in a hurry, so I patted their heads and gently sat them back down.

“Oh, all right.”

“Mm. Fair.”

Fortunately, everyone else seemed to accept the decision.

“Besides, I’ll set a seal slate here so we can come back anytime.”

The group seemed to want to keep fighting, but that statement was enough to cheer them all up for now.

I guess they’d taken a liking to life in our labyrinth vacation home.



“Master, I’m heeeere— Wait, Mia?”

Arisa opened the door and flounced into my workshop adjacent to the labyrinth vacation home.

For some reason, she was wearing a sheer negligee.

“Mrrr. Lewd.”

Mia wasn’t wrong, so I produced a cardigan from Storage and had her put it on.

“Aw, man, I thought for sure you were finally requesting my nighttime services,” Arisa grumbled.

Sorry, but I’m not interested in little girls.

“I called both of you here to help me with some work.” I looked at each of them in turn, making sure they understood before I continued. “Did you memorize the chants I gave you?”

“Mm. Got it.”

“Yeah, but all I can tell is that it’s teleportation-related and that it’s way too long.”

Mia puffed up her chest, but Arisa just furrowed her brow.

She was probably frustrated that she couldn’t understand the chant.

“Don’t worry—you’ll find out soon.”

I used Magic Mold to make two pedestals.

Then I produced a jar from Storage marked with a triangle, filled with molten magic liquid, and placed it on one pedestal. On the other, I placed one of the bronze swords we’d gotten in a treasure box in the labyrinth.

“All right. First, Mia, please focus on the triangle and start your chant.”

“Mm, okay. ■■■■■■■■■■■■...”

Maybe right around now?

Judging the timing, I called on Arisa next.

“Arisa, start yours, please.”

“Okey-dokey! ■■■■■■■■■■...”

Finally, both long chants started to come to their ends.

“...■■■■■ **Create Circuit 001** Kairo Zero Zero Ichi Souzou.”

When Mia finished her chant, the magic liquid rose up out of the jar like a snake and began to create a circuit of its own.

The circuits formed smaller and smaller branches, taking the form of a complex network of red lines that interwove in the shape of a sword.

“Pretty,” Mia murmured.

“...■■■■■ **Import Circuit 001** Kairo Zero Zero Ichi Tensou.”

When Arisa’s spell finished, the red circuits disappeared, replaced by bronze lines on the sword.

“...It’s finished.”

My AR display confirmed that the bronze sword had turned into a Magic Sword.

Unexpectedly, the sword’s creator still read **Celivera Labyrinth**. That was perfect—now I wouldn’t have to falsify a name.

“Hey, did we just...?”

“Yep. The chants I gave you two were for creating a Magic Sword.”

“M-Magic Sword?”

“Wow.”

The two of them jumped up in surprise, and I grinned.

I’d made these spells for a very particular reason.

The method I’d used so far, involving alchemy and the Liquid Control spell, could make Magic Swords with simple circuits like the kind sold in the old capital black market easily enough, but for more complicated circuits, swords like the ones I’d made Tama and Pochi were pretty much the limit.

If I tried to do it with swords that had been cast in a mold, the heat would warp the metal, and if I used a pre-forged sword, I had to take into account changes in the circuits that were already carved into it.

With this method, I didn’t think I could make a sword as good as the divine gift Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis no matter what degree of mastery I achieved, so I decided to change my approach.

First, I thought about using Water Magic to make the circuits while molding the sword, but it was too difficult to control to make any improvements on the old method.

So this was my next thought: to use that Water Magic method to make the circuits on their own, then transfer them onto a sword using Space Magic.

I explained all this to Mia and Arisa.

“But that doesn’t seem right.”

“Mrrr?”

Arisa frowned, looking down at her written chant.

Smiling at her, I returned to my own thoughts.

At first, I wanted to make a single Create Magic Sword spell that would create the circuits and carve them into a Magic Sword, but the chant came out extremely long and several times more complicated than even an advanced spell.

It would be no use to make a spell that no one could use, so I shelved that idea and went in a direction that even an ordinary person would be able to handle.

“Mia, let me see your spell.”

“Mm.”

Arisa took Mia’s chant paper and skimmed it quickly.

I knew she was accustomed to my original spells, but it was still impressive that she could read it just as quickly as I could.

“I knew it. It’s just like mine.”

I nodded at Arisa, pleased she’d figured it out on her own.

“So these were just to make *this* Magic Sword, right?”

“That’s right.”

There were no variations between the spells I’d given them.

Technically, the difference was that the position of the triangle being used as the focus changed between them, but that was an exception, since it wasn’t part of the chant itself.

“These two spells were just to put this specific magic circuit onto this specific bronze sword.”

The sword could be a different one as long as it was about the same shape, but the magic circuit was very fixed.

I’d set the coordinates for the teleport spell within the chant, so if the magic circuit changed at all, the teleportation wouldn’t work, either.

“That’s so over-the-top.”

“I know, but otherwise there would be too many settings related to the circuit shape and the teleport location.”

A computer was one thing, but asking a person to set thousands of digits precisely in their heads would be impossible.

“I wanna try.”

“Go ahead. The blade makes fire, though. Be careful.”

“Mm.”

Mia put magic power into the newly made Magic Sword and lifted it, and a protective barrier similar to the Shelter spell formed around the blade, emitting fire from the outside.

Mia swung the now-flaming sword around with one hand.

“Pretty.”

“I guess it’d be good for a fire dance or something.”

Mia looked gleeful, while Arisa made a rather rude remark.

True, it mostly functioned only as a torch unless you were fighting monsters that were weak to fire or impervious to normal attacks, but I thought it was a fittingly fantasy-like Magic Sword.

“Looks like its magic use is pretty efficient, too.”

I accepted the sword from Mia, examining it.

“Oh right—if you can control your magic well, you can even do things like this.”

I manipulated my magic as I swung the sword, and a fireball shot out of the tip of the sword like a Fire Rod.

“Whoa, now that’s the kind of sword you’d see in a manga!”

Arisa clapped gleefully for a second, then turned serious again.

“But is this really all that different from the swords you made for Pochi and the others?”

“On the surface, no. But it has other features, like ‘Body Strengthening,’ ‘Sharpblade,’ and even the ability to restore the user’s stamina.”

Otherwise, Mia wouldn’t be able to swing such a heavy-looking sword around in one hand.

It even circulated magic power between itself and the wielder, meaning it didn’t consume too much energy.

“Thanks, you two. Now I can get started on the next step.”

“Mrrr?”

“What’s the next step?”

Mia and Arisa tilted their heads.

“Making a Holy Sword with a legendary-class metal sword as a base, like orichalcum or crimson ore.”

Blue liquid could make much finer and more detailed circuits than regular magic liquid, and it would create a more power-efficient sword.

“Could you learn these ones next? No rush.”

Taking a single look at the huge sheaf of paper in my hands, Arisa and Mia fled as if on cue.

“I guess maybe a hundred kinds was too many?”

Muttering to myself, I chased after the two of them and eventually convinced them to help again on the condition that I prioritize making personal weapons for them.

Eventually, I’d like to make things like autonomous shields and floating guns, too.

Yep, crafting in a parallel world really got the blood pumping.

Reunion

Satou here. There are times when you might think you're doing well, but anyone watching would say you're crazy. That's why it's best to listen to advice from more experienced friends.

"Those soldiers back there seemed tense."

"Maybe some big shot went missing or something?"

Arisa and I were discussing a group of soldiers, decked out like a mountaineering party, who'd been gathered in the space near the labyrinth entrance when we passed through.

My map showed some important-looking figures inside the labyrinth, like royalty from a neighboring nation and a young count, so it probably had something to do with that.

"Huh. That's too bad."

"Hmm. Maybe next time we should put in for twice as much time in the labyrinth as before."

This time we'd come back right on the day we scheduled, but it was possible that some incident might prevent us from coming back on time.

At any rate, I was impressed that Arisa could chat naturally as we walked up the stairs, considering that she'd been out of breath even coming down them on the way in.

Leveling up must have really helped her a lot.

"We're heeere?"

"The scary door face is smiling, sir."

Tama and Pochi opened the door out of the labyrinth, which was engraved with a slightly creepy smiling sun.

"We're counting on you, Captain Zeorun."

"Yes, sir. I promise to rescue your friend at any cost."

On the other side of the door, I heard a somewhat familiar, teacherly

sounding voice.

As we emerged from the labyrinth and into the light from the windows, I saw a familiar face.

“Pe...?!”

When our eyes met, he started to say my name and then stopped partway through.

Ouch. I guess he forgot my name.

“It’s good to see you again, Viscount Siemmen.”

This was a high-ranking noble who ran a scroll production workshop in the old capital and who was the elder brother of my friend Tolma.

Unlike the somewhat bumbling Tolma, this man carried himself like a particularly strict professor.

“Forgive me, but I couldn’t help but overhear. If a friend of yours is missing, please allow me to assist you as well.”

It might sound like bragging, but considering my unique skill, there were probably few people in this world as qualified to locate a missing person as I was.

“No, erm... That won’t be necessary.”

Viscount Siemmen sighed and shook his head.

He probably felt that a civilian would only get in the way, since he’d already enlisted the help of the labyrinth army.

Sadly, he didn’t know about my unique skill.

Instead, I would have to withdraw for now, do a sneaky map search later, and secretly go rescue this person. This fellow had been very helpful to me with scroll creation, so I wanted to be of some use to him, too.

“We’ve already found him.”

Huh?

Surprised by the normally calm Viscount Siemmen’s sudden embrace, it took

me a moment to realize what was happening.

“...Then this must be Sir Pendragon?”

Startled, Officer Zeorun looked at me appraisingly.

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up a quiet murmur of “looking good.”

At first, I questioned whether his eyes were working, but then I realized that he probably meant that I looked awfully clean and healthy for someone who’d been wandering in the labyrinth for days on end.

Well, I took a bath every evening in our labyrinth vacation home, and I changed clothes every day.

“Yes, that’s right. This is Sir Pendragon, an irreplaceable friend of mine and a highly beneficial client.”

Viscount Siemmen finally released me, only to put an arm around my shoulder and introduce me to Captain Zeorun.

I didn’t remember him being quite so touchy-feely, but he must be relieved that I was all right, so I decided to go along with it.

Once I’d exchanged greetings with Captain Zeorun, the two explained why they had been about to launch a search for me.

Apparently, it had all started the day before: Viscount Siemmen had come to Labyrinth City to buy some cores and rare materials, and he had been trying to acquire some ant nectar from a fellow noble when he heard that some explorers had caused a chain rampage.

He then heard that the explorers had been rescued by a young noble with black hair and a mithril sword, who was accompanied by some small children and a scalefolk young lady with a monster spear, which led him to think of me.

Then, when he sent someone to the explorers’ guild to inquire about the matter, he learned that I had become an explorer the day of the chain rampage incident and that I hadn’t returned from the labyrinth since.

At first, he requested that they send in a search party, but the guild was unable to do so until my requested return date had passed.

Thus, he went directly to the labyrinth army general, rounded up some elite forces who specialized in labyrinth exploration, and formed a rescue party of his own. They had just been waiting for their explorer guides when I arrived.

Of course, the viscount himself wasn't going to enter the labyrinth, but he'd come to speak with Captain Zeorun.

Still, I was glad the explorers' guild was such a by-the-books organization.

If they'd sent in a rescue group right on the spot, it would've only made things complicated.

"I am terribly sorry to have worried you."

"Not at all—it appears that I was jumping to conclusions, from the looks of you. In fact, I apologize for causing such a commotion."

I bowed my head to Viscount Siemmen, who responded in kind.

Since the viscount managed to save face, perhaps we should both apologize to Captain Zeorun here, too.

"I told you, if he's strong enough to defeat a lesser hell demon, even a big bunch of area-4 monsters wouldn't be able to put a scratch on him."

The newcomer to the conversation was an armored knight.

According to the AR display, he was level 27 and one of Zeorun's men.

"Yes, you were right. You win the bet, sir. I'll have a cask of wine and five sheep sent to the barracks later."

"Make it ale, please. We don't drink that stuff." The knight grinned crookedly.

He didn't have a proper title, but he was still of noble class, so I was surprised that he preferred ale over fancy wine.

"Captain, shall I dismiss the men down below?"

"Right. Let me think..." Captain Zeorun stroked his goatee, contemplating for a moment before relaying his orders. "Tell the general that our mission is complete, and we will fulfill our formal duties."

"Mission complete," the messenger repeated. "Fulfilling our formal duties."

“Perfect. Go!”

The messenger dashed away.

“Formal duties?” Viscount Siemmen inquired.

“Yes, the pretense for this mission on paper was that we were taking down plunderers,” he explained frankly. “Since the paperwork went through and we’re all loaded up with equipment, we’ll just go in and wipe out some of the plunderers who have overrun area 2.”

Then the captain turned to the knight and grinned. “You lot must be sick of training anyway, eh? Gotta let loose on some scumbags once in a while.”

“Heh, it’s nice having a superior officer who gets it.”

After this exchange, Captain Zeorun and his knight excused themselves to the viscount and went into the labyrinth.

Maybe they really did enjoy fighting plunderers, but I was guessing half the reason was so that Viscount Siemmen and I wouldn’t feel guilty for wasting their time.

Once they got back, I’d have to deliver some food and drink to them as thanks, too.

“Viscount Siemmen, I would like to thank the general for his concern as well. How should I go about doing so?”

“You needn’t worry about it. I’ll go thank him tomorrow.”

As a former office worker, I couldn’t simply accept this.

“If it would be best for me not to accompany you, then I understand, but...”

“You’re an upright fellow, aren’t you? Very well, I’ll send someone to collect you tomorrow afternoon. General Erthal prefers sweet wine. I’ll ready some casks, so perhaps you can prepare some appropriate snacks to accompany them.”

“I’d be happy to, if such a modest thanks is acceptable.”

“There’s nothing modest about it.” Viscount Siemmen looked almost annoyed. “Your legendary ‘miracle’ cooking is worth its weight in gold. You

proved that in the old capital, as I'm sure Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen would agree."

Now, those names brought back memories. The gourmet-loving pair of nobles really did seem to deeply enjoy my food, almost as much as my group did, which made it well worth cooking for them.

"Very well. I will be careful to avoid debasing myself with regards to my food."

He made me feel a bit like I'd been scolded by a teacher, and I took his words to heart.

"Hmm. Good." Viscount Siemmen cleared his throat and changed the subject. "I shall hold a banquet tomorrow evening to celebrate your safe return. Given the short notice, I may not be able to gather all my noble friends, but I am sure that at least half of them will make it."

It sounded as though he was planning to introduce me to some well-connected local nobles.

There seemed to be some rather troublesome nobles here, too, like Sokell, so it would be nice to know I had some good ones on my side.

He went on to add that he would normally hold the banquet a few days from now, but he would be leaving for the royal capital on a flying ship the morning after next and wouldn't return for several weeks. He couldn't delay it any further.

Viscount Siemmen had seemed busy since we first met in the old capital, so I was very grateful to him for making time for my sake.

Maybe at the banquet I could give him an original spell that might be profitable as thanks.

The fireworks seemed to be popular. Maybe I could combine Magic String and Mana Light to create firefly lights that could be freely controlled by the user.

I had already analyzed the modules for those, so I could probably make it by the next day.

"...Young noble!"

I heard a young woman call out from the Celivera City side of the passageway.

“Thank goodness!”

“You’re all right!”

The two Lovely Wings explorers who we’d saved in the chain rampage incident came running up to embrace me.

The iron pair of Arisa and Mia managed to cut the embrace short, but I did get to enjoy the muscular physique of Miss Charming and the soft curves of Miss Beauty.

They both seemed to have assumed that we’d gotten lost in the midst of the rampage.

“I’m glad you two are all right, too.”

“Thanks to you, mister.”

“Yes, you really saved us.”

Once we’d enjoyed our little reunion, Viscount Siemmen informed the pair that their services as explorers would no longer be needed and paid them for their troubles.

He explained to me that he’d been planning to hire the two women as labyrinth guides for the search party.

Once the women had thanked the viscount, they said they had to get to work for now and went into the labyrinth.

Since they’d caused trouble for the labyrinth army by causing the chain rampage, they were working to pay off a fine.

After all, they were considered partly responsible along with the man called Besso and his party for exploring the maze ant nest.

The fine was so expensive that even the money for the ant nectar wasn’t enough to pay it off.

Though they dodged this point, I assumed they paid what they were lacking with borrowed money.

Once the two women were gone, Viscount Siemmen said he was returning to the city.

After we saw him off along with his retainers, my group and I headed to the guild's trade counter.

"Congratulations on your safe return."

"Thank you," I said to the friendly guild employee with a smile.

"How did your exploration go?"

"We've got cores, maze ant materials, and maze frog meat."

I placed a flat shoulder bag on the table, and the guild employee smiled, undoubtedly thinking that we hadn't brought much back.

Arisa grinned impishly as she looked from the clerk's face to mine.

"First, a hundred and thirty-seven cores."

"...What?"

I opened the bag, which was actually a magic Garage Bag, and pulled out five pouches full of cores. The clerk's face froze.

Opening one of the pouches, I showed her the cores.

"Most of them are low-grade, but the large ones like these are grades three and above."

I was glad Count Kuhanou had taught me about the grade levels for cores before.

"Incredible! These are maze beetle and soldier mantis cores, aren't they?"

This time, her expression moved from one of shock to gleeful surprise.

Judging by her reaction, it was probably wise of me to leave the cores from stronger monsters like the dendrobiums in the storage room of our labyrinth home.

We'd actually collected over a thousand cores in total, but this time I brought only enough to earn us our bronze badges.

"These ones are around grade one or two, too—there's not a single dust or white one to be found."

According to the information I got from her later, "dust" was a nickname for a

small core that was less than an ounce in size.

I remembered the small white cores we'd gotten from the likes of the walking beans and hopping potatoes. I could see why those would be considered little more than dust.

"Is this enough to advance to bronze badges?"

I was pretty certain that this would bring us all from wood to bronze badges, but I asked just to be sure.

"Yes, more than enough. Rick, can you calculate the payment for these, please? But first, bring the paperwork for the bronze badges."

"Of course, Chief Vena. Eight forms, correct?"

"Yes, please."

I smiled as I listened to their exchange. It was nice of them to get the forms for my kids without me even needing to ask.

"Goodness, it's been a long time since we saw so many cores from anyone but a garnet-badge party. You're quite a promising group of new explorers, young master."

Now the clerk was calling me "young master," too. This was only our second time meeting, and the first time was six days ago, so maybe she forgot my name.

At her "promising new explorers" comment, Arisa struck a silent victory pose, looking extremely pleased.

Because Tama and Pochi were tucked under Liza's arms, they could join in only by raising their fists along with her.

Mia and Nana didn't seem to follow Arisa's excitement, tilting their heads cutely in a sign of confusion.

Lulu and Liza, meanwhile, watched the rest of the group with warm smiles.

"Now then, what materials might we have to look forward to?"

The guild clerk looked excited as I began to produce our materials from the Garage Bag.

“Here are seven maze ant carapaces.”

The clerk beamed.

“Also, ten guardian ant blade arms.”

“...Eh?”

Surprise began to register on her face.

“Oh, and three sets of elite ant wings for making Antwing Swords.”

“Ant...wings?”

Now her face was frozen in shock, as if she’d seen something unbelievable.

The guardian ants and elite ants were monsters we’d encountered when we entered the ant nest after parting ways with the Lovely Wings ladies. They were stronger than the maze ants, but my group still defeated them without a problem.

I had more pieces than I could count in Storage, but I decided to turn in only a number that would be consistent with the length of our stay.

“You didn’t go into the nest, did you?!”

The clerk’s exclamation had a note of reproach to it.

I couldn’t blame her for that. More than half my party were children, or at least looked that way, so it was shocking that I would take them into a monster nest on their first time in the labyrinth.

From her perspective, I was sure she wanted to tell me off.

“No, they were roaming around outside the nest. It may have been because of the chain rampage.”

I used my “Fabrication” skill to make an excuse.

Technically, it wasn’t a lie. The materials I’d given her were primarily from ants we’d found outside the nest.

I didn’t want to cause a commotion, so I decided to cover up the fact that we actually entered the nest.

“And here’s the meat of three maze frogs.”

With Liza's help, I produced the maze frog meat, which we'd broken down into hundred-pound increments.

"That's quite a lot. Huey, measure the weight, please."

"Yes, Chief Vena."

An elderly man in an apron began weighing the frog meat on a scale.

"This must be the last of it, correct? None of these is prohibited from Labyrinth City, and they're all on the list of requested materials."

With that, the clerk paused in thought.

"However, we can only pay up to a certain amount for some of these, so I would recommend that you bring them to the workshops and distributors listed on that board."

I was surprised that the woman wasn't prioritizing the guild's profit.

"Is it really all right to recommend something like that?"

"Yes, while we may be called the explorers' guild, we are actually a public organization under the management of the Shiga Kingdom department of labyrinth resources."

That made sense. Labyrinths were like mines of valuable resources. Of course the king of the Shiga Kingdom would have a hand in managing them.

"Any profits are put toward operating expenses, but most of that comes from fixed monster core collection."

Oh right. It was compulsory to sell cores to the government.

"The guild's exchange program is primarily to ensure that explorers who aren't knowledgeable about trade don't get taken advantage of by crafty merchants. Once explorers reach a certain level of wealth, they can buy better equipment, which means they're more likely to survive."

So it all comes back to making sure they can continue to collect cores, huh?

"Still, I'd like to sell most of the frog meat here, if that's all right."

"Are you certain? With this high quality, you could sell it for anywhere from two to even three times higher a price than what we can offer you here."

“That’s all right. I don’t have a business relationship with any particular merchants.”

I felt a little bad when she seemed so concerned, but I had mostly just brought this stuff here to see how she would react, so I didn’t feel like dragging it all the way to a workshop to sell it.

I could worry about things like that once I’d made some connections in Labyrinth City.

“Very well. Please fill out these forms while we complete our calculations.”

The only required fields on the forms were our names and wood badge numbers.

Other than that, they just contained the words “...has brought the appropriate number of cores back from the labyrinth and requests promotion to a bronze badge.”

“This is a fairly simple form.”

“Well, in many cases, people who wish to be explorers can’t understand anything too complicated,” the clerk explained.

With the low literacy rate of this land and the lack of many schools or other places of learning, I supposed that was inevitable.

“Once you have chosen your party name, please write it above your names.”

Oh right. We hadn’t chosen a party name yet.

“What should our party name be?”

When nothing came to my mind, I asked the rest of the group.

Arisa was first to make a suggestion.

“Sir Pendragon and His Lovers.”

Nope.

“Pochi and Master.”

“Aw, you don’t want the rest of us around, Pochi?” Lulu teased gently.

“O-of course I do. Let’s call it ‘Pochi and Master and Tama and Liza and Lulu

and Mia and Nana and Arisa’!”

“So looong?”

Even Tama thought the revision was a little ridiculous.

“Perhaps we should choose something shorter. How about ‘Demon Lord Slayers’?”

“Doesn’t that sound too much like a title?”

It’d be a pain if anyone believed that name, and otherwise, most people would probably just laugh at us for being would-be heroes.

“‘Larvae Protection Squad,’ I suggest.”

“Whaaat? Then we’d be stuck protecting all those kids outside the labyrinth.”

“Although I would at least like to make sure they don’t starve...”

Aren’t there any soup kitchens in this city or anything like that?

“I like ‘Sir Pendragon and His Darling Friends.’”

“Lulu, you really are Arisa’s sister.”

“What do you mean by that, Miss Liza?!”

Arisa’s penchant for Showa era–inspired cheesiness was rubbing off on Lulu.

“Fairy Friends.”

“Well, we *are* friends, but...that doesn’t really sound like a party name, does it?”

Now Tama was the only one who hadn’t made a suggestion.

“Mm? ‘Meat-Eater Squad’?”

“Fried-Chicken-Eater Squad.”

“Chocolate-Parfait-Eater Squad.”

Tama’s suggestion set off a chain of similar ideas from the rest of the group.

Were they just saying what they wanted to eat under the pretense of suggesting a party name?

Speaking of chocolate parfaits, I would have to check in with Nea the elf soon

to see how her chocolate-making experiments were going.

At this rate, we would never come up with a party name, so for the time being, I just put down my surname as our party name.

Once I'd checked that all the forms were right and handed them in, the guild employee signed each of them with the words "receipt of cores confirmed—Labyrinth Gate Supervisor Vena," then put them away in a folder.

"The application is complete. Your bronze badges should be ready within three days or so. Until then, please keep carrying your wood badges."

She added that we could pick up the badges at the east guild when they were complete.

While we waited for the calculations to be finished, I asked the clerk about taxes, handling charges, and things like that.

She stared at me in surprise for a moment, until she glanced at my aristocratic clothing and seemed satisfied.

No doubt she found it unusual that an explorer would be interested in things like taxes.

"The taxes on the cores sold here are deducted in advance," she said, then glanced at me to make sure I understood before she continued. "Aside from the cores, anything explorers bring back from the labyrinth is tax-exempt."

"Tax-exempt?"

"Yes, since our main priority is the safe and consistent retrieval of cores."

What? In my mind, feudal societies always taxed commoners as much as they possibly could...

"We do take taxes wherever we can," she added with a wink.

They must take heaps from merchants and artisans instead.

"I've finished the calculations, Chief."

"These ones, too."

Receiving the results of the calculations from her lackeys, the head clerk informed me of the results.

“Cores differ in value based on size, grade, and any damage on the surface.”

Looking at the piece of paper, I found that the maze ant cores were worth one copper coin each, while the maze frog cores were worth two silver coins each.

I'd also included a single core from one of the 30s-level monsters that my group had defeated in droves every day, just for reference. A particularly large one, it was worth five gold coins—a significant difference.

“The prices vary quite a bit, don't they?”

“Yes, grades three and higher are in great demand for potions and magic tools, and there are many tools that can only be made with cores of a certain size or larger.”

That would explain the massive difference in prices.

The cores from the whales—like the giant monster fish Tobkezerra—were a deeper red than even red grade 9. I didn't intend to sell them, but I was a little curious how much they would be worth.

“This is the amount we can pay for the other materials. Please have a look.”

I examined the other paper the guild clerk handed me.

At the guild's buying rates, the seven carapaces were worth fourteen silver coins total, the ten blade arms were worth forty silver coins, and the three ant wings were six silver coins. If I brought them to a workshop, the carapaces and blades would be worth several times more, while the intact wings would be worth two or even three gold coins apiece.

Incidentally, two pounds of the frog meat was worth around a silver coin. Hunting frogs might be more stable for making money than cores.

Doing a bit of calculations, I guessed that an explorer up to level 10 would be able to just barely scrape by, level 15 or so would be able to make a normal living, around level 20 would be relatively profitable as long as the explorer wasn't injured, and anyone above level 30 would be able to make a pretty cushy living for themselves.

Of course, that'd be for a normal explorer without any of my advantages, like my map and other information.

Going by these prices, I could understand why most low-level explorers had such light armor.

“This is the total for the cores and materials.”

I did a little mental math and confirmed that it was correct.

In total, we’d earned twenty gold coins and thirty-one silver coins.

If I sold the ant parts at a workshop, I could make another twenty gold coins or so. That meant if an ordinary person earned this much over the course of forty days, they’d make about one gold coin per day.

Although in reality, it took much less time, and we hunted dozens of times more monsters than what I’d sold here.

Of course, if I used these materials to make potions, magic tools, magic weapons, and so on, the earnings would amount to an astronomical figure, but I doubted there was that much of a market for such things, and I only wanted to bother making them for my group or for my own amusement anyway.

“Is that acceptable?”

“Yes, thank you.”

I nodded, taking back the materials the guild couldn’t buy and putting the profits in the small pouch I used as a wallet.

“Finally, I have to confirm: You haven’t hidden any additional cores, have you?”

The guild clerk’s eyes glittered.

According to my AR, she had the **Eye of Judgment**, a gift of the Urion faith.

If I lied to her—or tried to conceal a crime, rather—she would probably find out.

Thus, I responded to her question truthfully.

“Those are all the cores *we brought back from the labyrinth.*”

The rest of them were still in the labyrinth vacation home, and the ones in my Storage weren’t from this labyrinth.

“Perfect. Thank you very much.”

“No, not at all.”

The woman smiled at me, and I beamed back at her in return.

My “Poker Face” skill was the MVP, as usual.

“Now, before we go back...”

I quickly counted the amount of bag-carrier children sitting by the wall outside the labyrinth entrance. There were twenty of them.

According to the AR display, they all had the **Starving** condition.

“I’d like to share the other half of this frog meat...”

“You’d like to borrow the grill and some coal, correct?”

The clerk was ready to help before I even finished my sentence.

“Lulu, Liza, would you mind cooking the meat for them?”

“Yes, master.”

“You can count on us, sir.”

Liza set up the grill, while Lulu cut the meat into small chunks.

“We’ll heeelp?”

“Pochi’s a pro at putting meat on skewers, sir.”

I wasn’t sure if such a professional job existed, but Tama and Pochi started skewering the chunks of meat as Lulu cut them.

“It isn’t catching fire very well.”

“Here. ■ **Fire Hi.**”

Mia used Spirit Magic to assist Liza, who was having difficulty getting the fire to start.

Unlike inside the labyrinth, there were plenty of spirits here, so she could use Spirit Magic without a problem.

“Oh, wow!”

“What a big fire.”

“It’s magic!”

“Gosh, you’re a mage, miss? But you’re around our age!”

The little kids exclaimed in surprise at Mia’s magic, and the eldest girl gazed at Mia admiringly.

Mia kept a cool expression, but her nostrils flared slightly and her mouth twitched. She must not have minded the attention much.

“Rejoice! Our great master, Sir Pendragon, is going to treat all of you to maze-frog-meat skewers!”

At Arisa’s declaration, the kids turned to me and chorused a thank-you.

They’d probably learned this from that Dozon fellow.

“You must not gather all at once, I inform. It is safest to line up in a single-file line, I direct.”

“Mm. Line.”

Nana and Mia took charge of keeping the kids in an orderly line.

There was so much food that we cooked for a good half hour or so until the kids were full, then gave the remaining half to the guild employees and other passing explorers.

The rest of my group snacked on the meat with the other kids, but I planned to get us all some of our inn’s famous lamb dishes to celebrate our return from the labyrinth, so I warned them not to eat too much.



“Woow, they have a regular service route and everything?”

The explorers’ guild had a carriage that departed every two hours from the west guild in the labyrinth entrance area to the north guild where we’d applied for our explorer badges.

It was more like a cart than a proper enclosed carriage, though.

“It’s a half hour until the next carriage leaves, but...you’ve got eight people, the maximum capacity, so I can just take you now.”

“Thank you. That would be wonderful.”

Sine the driver was nice enough to adapt his schedule for us, I gave him a little extra money along with the carriage fee.

Once we all climbed aboard, the carriage headed out.

“Master, I have located a group in fiery red, I report.”

Nana pointed toward a group of explorers all clad in red cloaks or armor, followed by a shrieking group of female fans.

“Them there’s the Red Dragon’s Roar, a party of all garnet-badge explorers. The fella with the red scabbard is their leader, Baronet Jelil. His nickname’s the Scarlet Nobleman. Looks wimpy, but he’s so good, rumor has it he’s the next member o’ the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga.”

While the driver explained, I verified his information with the AR.

Baronet Jelil was the unusually high level of 45. He seemed to be a magic knight, wielding a one-handed sword and shield and excelling in Fire Magic.

His party members were all within the level 30 to 40 range.

“Are they the strongest party around?”

“Most likely. The top explorer, Master Yasaku, is away right now, so I’d say they’re the best in the game at the moment.”

“Then, for now, this Jelil character and company will be our rivals!”

“Rogerrr?”

“Let’s work hard to be the strongest, sir!”

Arisa and the others declared a one-sided rivalry.

Of course, Mr. Jelil didn’t hear this through the crowd of people, and the driver simply chuckled. “Good luck, future top explorers.”

Arisa was probably being serious, though.

In reality, we already had better equipment than his party. It was only a matter of time and a little bit of work.

“There are lots of shops for explorers around here. The artisan district is by the south gate.”

The carriage passed the west guild and into a narrow road surrounded by a jumble of shops.

As I listened to the driver, I gazed at the shops and the pedestrians wandering around.

“The aqueducts in this city are awfully dirty.”

“They probably don’t use this water for cooking, though, right?”

Arisa gazed down into the water, which contained garbage and bits of food.

“Sure we do. We just get it from one o’ the parts that isn’t dirty, that’s all.”

“Seriously?!” Arisa exclaimed.

I had to admit, I was pretty shocked, too. This place might be hard on those of us who were born and raised in sanitary environments.

But of course, I had spells like the Everyday Magic Pure Water and magic tools like the Well Bag. It wasn’t a big deal for us.

“Rich people and nobles have wells of their own, and that’s all upstream, so it’s probably clean, eh?”

Possibly noticing Arisa’s and my shock, the driver gave us some reassurance.

Recovering and looking around at the street, I saw that there was trash lying on the ground, and the explorers wandering about were throwing aside their scraps and garbage, too.

At least there wasn’t any human waste in the streets like there would be in medieval Europe.

According to my map, this place did have a sewage system, though it wasn’t as large in scale as the one in the old capital.

“Master, the larvae hiding in the alleyways do not look well, I report.”

Nana pointed out a few children slumped in the shadows of the alleys.

“Yeah, them’s kids who can’t find work. They’re probably passed out from hunger, see.”

“Huh. Don’t they have a secret thieving circle or something?”

“No, not really. Lots of the shops in Labyrinth City are run by former explorers, so stealing from ’em means you’re putting your life on the line. Besides, even first-time offenders get sent away to the mines here. Thieving’s a last resort.”

The driver quickly dispelled Arisa’s romantic delusions.

This seemed to be a pretty tough city. If there were any temples that gave out food to malnourished children, I would have to leave them a big donation.

“It can be a little sketchy round these parts, so don’t go into any of them side-alley shops unless you know what’s what. Lots of dangerous folks and kidnappers about.”

The carriage passed through a little arch into a street that was evidently the pleasure district. Something about it just gave off an air of delicious indecency.

There weren’t any beauties waving from the doorways or anything, so I wasn’t sure why it felt so exciting.

Not that I would say anything, of course.

Once we left this district, we were on the main road that linked the north and south gates, and soon we reached the busy area in front of the north gate.

“Master, we are passing through the inner wall, I report.”

Once we passed under the wall that separated the nobles’ quarters, the scene changed into a quiet street with few passersby.

“Them big buildings over there belong to counts and viscounts, and most of ’em near the wall are barons, baronets, and suchlike. There are some residences a little farther along for multigenerational hereditary knight families, too.”

There seemed to be a lot of distinctions among classes.

“Honorary knights and other new nobles like that tend to live near the walls. Some of ’em who don’t like all the noble formalities even live outside the walls instead.”

According to my AR display, many of the houses in this area were empty.

Most likely, one couldn't obtain a big house like these without high family status.

The driver continued to give us helpful information until we arrived in front of the east guild.



"Hi, I'd like to extend my stay at the inn. Is that all right?"

We returned to the inn where we'd reserved a room in which we had yet to spend a single night.

I was paying a high price for this room, so tonight we would take full advantage of it.

Or so I thought...

"S-Sir Pendragon? Y-you're alive? I thought you were dead..."

...but the innkeeper's response was rather disturbing.

"W-well, I'm quite glad you're all right. E-erm, yes, you can extend your stay. I'm terribly sorry, but your room is being cleaned at the moment. For now, please wait in the lobby. W-we shan't charge any additional fees or anything like that, of course."

The innkeeper was acting highly suspicious; his eyes darted every which way.

Just then, Tama and Pochi came running back from checking on the horses.

"They're gone?"

"The runosaurs and carriage aren't there, either, sir."

Oh-ho? What's this all about?

Our eyes all turned toward the innkeeper.

Arisa and Liza, especially, were practically glaring a hole through him.

"Y-your horses are out for their regular exercise in the pasture. The carriage was dirty, so we are currently polishing it up at a workshop that specializes in luxury carriages. This is a free service from the inn, of course."

I see. He must have thought I'd died and tried to sell them.

“Is that right? That carriage was specially made by a master in the old capital. It’s worth well over two hundred gold coins. It won’t be scratched or soiled in any way at this workshop, I hope?”

“O-of course not, sir.”

I decided to make the man suffer a little for his sins.

“Liza, Nana, I’m concerned. Could you go and check on the carriage?”

“N-no, no, that will not be necessary. Surely you must be exhausted, since you’ve just returned from the labyrinth. We’ve received some particularly good cuts of lamb today, so how would you like a meal? I’ll send someone to fetch your horses and carriage at once. If you wouldn’t mind having a meal in the meantime, erm...”

This guy seemed like way too small-time of a crook to be running such a fancy inn. Maybe he was a son-in-law or something trying to make some extra cash?

“Everyone, this kind innkeeper says he’ll treat us all to a lamb feast free of charge. Let’s thank him, shall we?”

As a fine for his trickery, I figured he could at least give us a good meal.

The younger kids all thanked the man cheerfully. I wasn’t sure whether he realized that I’d figured out his scheme or not, but either way, the innkeeper agreed to give us a free meal.

After our delicious feast, our horses and carriage were safely returned to the inn.

The food was delicious, and the horses hadn’t been replaced with new ones or anything, so I decided to let it slide.

I’d certainly given the man a fright, and I was sure a full-course lamb meal for eight people was a considerable blow to his wallet. He’d probably suffered enough.

I would have to whip up a special meal for the horses later, too.

“What’s going on here, Hesson? Where’s my carriage?! I didn’t pony up three hundred gold coins just so you could bail on our deal at the last minute!”

Just as I was getting ready to forgive the innkeeper, an old gentleman came storming into the lobby.

“Baronet Dyukeli! Erm, I’m afraid there’s been a mistake...”

The innkeeper shrank away from the skinny old man.

He must have tried to sell my carriage to this man for three hundred coins. From the sound of things, he was pretty good at driving a high price.

“Why, if it isn’t the baronet! Please do come into the parlor. We’ve just received some fine red wine from the royal capital.”

The lady of the inn managed to coax the enraged baronet out of the room.

I didn’t want to stick my nose into any more trouble than I had to.

The lamb feast had satisfied my appetite, and no doubt the innkeeper was going to pay dearly for trying to swindle a high-class baronet.

I had no desire to keep staying at an inn that I couldn’t trust, so I decided we would find a new place to stay.

We could check in on the Ivy Manor and see if it was habitable, and if not, surely Viscount Siemmen or one of his friends could suggest a good place.

It’d be fun to put a Return seal slate somewhere in the city and live in our labyrinth vacation home, too.

The Ivy Manor and the Temporary Home

Satou here. Sometimes you'll hear a story about someone you know in an unexpected place. It usually makes you realize how small the world really is, but it might also cause you to think better of that person now that you know about this unexpected side of them. Or worse, of course.

"Shall we get going, then?"

Once we'd checked out of the inn, we decided to go to the Ivy Manor, the place where the elf Trazayuya had lived, as a potential new dwelling.

"So where exactly is this Ivy Manor?" Arisa asked once we were in the carriage.

It hadn't turned up when I searched the map for it earlier, but there was one large area of the city that was considered a separate part of the map, so my guess was that it was in there. It was on the southeast side of the city, close to where the nobles lived.

"See that forest over there? I think that's where it probably is."

"Ooh, that? I figured it was a nature park or something."

"Mm. Lots of spirits."

Sure enough, when I activated my Spirit Vision, I could see that there were several times more spirits around the forest than anywhere else in the vicinity. There was one particular area where the spirits seemed to gather most, so I marked it on the map as our destination for the time being.

Our carriage traveled toward the forest for a while.

Once we passed through an arch in a low stone wall that formed a barrier around the forest, we entered a new map.

When I used "Search Entire Map," I was able to spot the Ivy Manor right away.

There was only one house in the whole forest, so that had to be it.

"It really does look like a nature park."

“There are many small birds and animals, I report.”

“Mm, peaceful.”

Beyond the arch was a large expanse of nature. Well-dressed people strolled along the small paths weaving through the trees, and there were some children catching small fish and prawns on the banks of the reservoirs and waterways.

The Ivy Manor seemed to be farther upstream from this clear reservoir.

According to my map, it was at the source of the water.

Turning off the beaten path, we took the carriage along a narrow road hidden by some weeds.

After we'd proceeded for a while, the carriage suddenly changed directions.

“What's the matter, Lulu?”

“I'm sorry. I suddenly got the sense that I had to change directions for some reason.”

My log said I'd resisted a Return Home spell. It was probably a security measure to keep people away.

“Mrrr?”

Mia seemed perfectly fine; maybe the spell didn't work on elves.

Everyone else was affected the same way as Lulu.

“There seems to be some kind of spell here, so Mia and I will go on ahead for now. The rest of you wait here for a little while, please.”

With that, Mia and I started walking toward the Ivy Manor.

I took Mia's small hand in mine, not wanting her to get lost because of the teleportation spell Wandering Forest.

“Date.”

Mia looked up at me happily, blushing a little.

I couldn't quite bring myself to tell her that this was just so she wouldn't get lost, so I simply smiled back and enjoyed our stroll through the peaceful forest.

After about five minutes, a single mansion came into view deep in the forest.

True to its name, the front of the house was half-covered in ivy.

“Ivy Manor?”

“Yes, that’s probably it.”

It looked similar to Trazayuya’s house back in Bolenan Forest.

It was only about half the size of the houses in the noble quarters, but the area of land was about the same.

Just outside the hedge was a moat around six feet across, full of clear blue water. There were more hedges on the other side, too, so it must be part of the Ivy Manor.

This area was a little higher in elevation than the rest of Labyrinth City; the water that flowed through the moat passed into a thin waterway, which connected to the reservoir that provided Labyrinth City with water.

“There.”

Mia pointed at an arch of trees and a white wooden gate around waist height. However, there was another moat on the other side of the gate and no bridge with which to cross it.

Checking with my “Magic Perception,” I found that there was even a Space Magic barrier spell within the low moat.

Either Trazayuya was paranoid about security or Labyrinth City had been so dangerous back then that he had no other choice but to do all this.

“Notes.”

Mia produced a cute little memo pad from her Fairy Pack.

“<Open, o gate. I am Misanaria of Bolenan Forest. Greet us swiftly, o gatekeeper.>”

Mia read the written password out loud in Elvish.

She had pretty strong enunciation for someone who normally didn’t speak.

When she finished, a little girl’s face poked out through the gate on the other side of the moat.

As soon as our eyes met, she quickly concealed herself again.

“<I-it’s a human whelp! How’d he get past the Return Home barrier?>”

I overheard a rather rude mutter with my “Keen Hearing” skill.

The girl, who had dark-black hair in a short ponytail, was the brownie of the house. Other house spirits of her race had helped us in Bolenan Forest, so I didn’t even need to consult my AR to figure out that much.

“<Greet us swiftly, o gatekeeper.>”



As Mia repeated the last part of the password, I held her up so that the brownie could see her.

Of course, I also lowered her hood so that her elf ears would be visible.

"<An elf!>"

After a surprised exclamation from the girl, a bridge extended between the two gates.

It was a transparent bridge that almost looked like glass.

"Mm."

Mia held out her hand again, and I took it as we walked across the bridge together.

"Lady Misanaria, I am Lelillil, guardian of the Ivy Manor, granddaughter of Gillil."

It looked like Lelillil already knew Mia.

"Just Mia."

"<I could never be so discourteous as to call an honored elf by a nickname!>"

Lelillil had been speaking Elvish, while Mia spoke in short Shigan statements as usual, but Lelillil made the transition to Shigan.

"...But by all means, madam, you may call me Lelill for short."

"Mm. Lelill."

Lelillil was level 20 and had sonar-related skills, stealth-based race-specific skills, and so on. She would probably make a great scout.

Although she looked young enough to be in preschool, her actual age was around sixty, so I had better be careful about how I spoke to her.

If I let slip her real age, I got the feeling she would be angry.

"Incidentally, Lady Misanaria, who might this human whelp be? It is quite unacceptable for a mere human to hold hands with the likes of an elf. Shall I teach him a lesson in manners?"

Wow, we'd just met and she already had a problem with me.

The people of Bolenan Forest didn't discriminate against humans, but this Lelillil seemed to think of them as lesser beings.

Had she come to dislike humans after living among them?

...For some reason, I felt like I couldn't blame her.

"Mrrr, rude."

Mia wasn't enjoying Lelillil's rude attitude toward me.

"Satou. My fiancé."

"What? Erm...surely you jest."

Lelillil flailed, completely shocked by Mia's declaration.

"Mrrr. Parents agreed."

"Wh-wh-what?! That, that can't beeee..."

This was apparently too much to bear: Lelillil collapsed to the ground.

"Now then..."

I couldn't just leave her like that.

Lifting the tiny Lelillil, I placed her on top of a sheet in the shade of a tree.

Between the clear water and all the nearby greenery, the occasional breeze was very cool and refreshing.

In the midst of the somewhat dusty, dirty Labyrinth City, this park area seemed to be part of another world entirely.

"...Ah, I just had a terrible nightmare."

"Mm, nightmare?"

"Yes, that an honored elf was beguiled by a human whelp..."

That was a pretty rude thing to say after I had so kindly carried her into the shade.

Lelillil sat up unsteadily, then gasped and looked at Mia. Then, noticing me belatedly, she turned toward me with slow, jerky movements.

I'll spare you the details of the ensuing chaos, but suffice to say that little girls

could be terribly difficult to deal with.

“Now, Lady Misanaria, Satou, please come this way.”

Having finally reached grudging acceptance of my existence, Lelillil led us toward the manor.

I had her remove the Return Home spell from Arisa and the others, then contacted them with Telephone to have them meet us here. It shouldn't take them long to arrive.

Lelillil was able to control the bridge, the security magic, and so on with the proxy medal she carried.

The medallion Mia had received from Gillil was also called a “warden medal,” so it probably had higher authority than Lelillil's medal.

“So am I correct that you are the new master of the Ivy Manor, Lady Misanaria?”

“No.”

Mia shook her head and pointed at me.

“Satou.”

“What? That wh... Erm, Satou?”

You were about to say “whelp,” right?

Well, I guess that's not wrong, since you're really an old lady.

“Gillil told me that we could use this manor if we were staying in Labyrinth City. He gave us that medal, too.”

It wasn't me exactly who he had said that to, but there was no need to make things more complicated.

“Tch, that senile old geez... Errr, I mean, my grandfather? I don't believe it.”

Come on, Lelillil. You were clearly about to say “senile old geezer.”

“Mrrr. True.”

“Perhaps he is simply losing his mi... That is, in less than perfect health?”

“Satou saved Bolenan Forest. Friends with Aaze.”

That was a pretty long statement for Mia.

Although I would've preferred that she call us "potential love interests" or something more hopeful like that.

"Aaze... Surely you don't mean Lady Aialize the high elf?"

Lelillil jumped back in shock.

If this were a manga, her eyes would probably be popping out of her head.

"...Preposterous! A high elf showing herself in front of a mere human? And they're *friends*? But high elves are celestial beings, demi-gods even!"

I couldn't help but smirk a little.

Such dramatic titles like "celestial being" and "demi-god" didn't exactly fit the airheaded Miss Aaze.

Except maybe the Goddess Aaze I met in the memory storehouse of the World Tree.

"...T-truly?"

"Yes, I have the great honor of her close acquaintance. She taught me Spirit Vision and was even kind enough to bring me to the observation deck of the World Tree."

Lelillil's eyes widened.

"I... I'm so terribly sorryyyyyyy!"

Then she threw herself on the floor in apology for how rude she had been.

On top of that, she started calling me Mr. Satou, saying that "I cannot address even a human by name alone if he is a friend of a high elf!"

Incidentally, when the rest of our group arrived and I told her that they were friends of Miss Aaze, too, Lelillil fainted all over again.

Hang in there, Lelillil.



"Lady Misanaria and company, please come this way."

Lelillil guided us into the manor. The inside was the very picture of an

ordinary Shiga Kingdom house.

In one corner of the entrance hall was a narrow, easy-to-miss hallway, which led to a single mirror that let off a powerful magic energy.

Lelillil held up her medal, and light rippled across the mirror's surface.

Ooh, this looks like the kind of mirror that would lead to a parallel world—oh, wait, this is a parallel world.

“Follow me, please.”

Without further ado, Lelillil leaped into the mirror. Looking at my map, I saw that she was now in a location about thirty feet underground.

“Looks like this is some kind of teleport gate,” I informed my surprised companions, then jumped into the mirror as well.

After a sensation that was more like the warping of Space Magic teleportation than being teleported by an Elvish fairy ring, I arrived in a different area.

It seemed like a grassy courtyard and was incredibly bright despite being underground.

The ceiling was over ten feet high, so this felt more like natural light than magic.

There must be some of those optical fiber plants, like the ones on the ceiling in the cavern containing our labyrinth vacation home, or a spell that somehow relayed the light of the sun.

As I looked around the courtyard, the rest of my group came through the mirror as well.

“This is the main area of the Ivy Manor. The building up above is a mere construction, only used for guests.”

Lelillil's words reminded me of the treetop guesthouses in Bolenan Forest and the futuristic city where the elves actually lived.

Clearly the elves had a penchant for this kind of thing.

Checking on the map, I saw that in addition to a residential area of more than a hundred rooms underground, there were even workshops and equipment

that Trazayuya had once used.

“Quite a cautious fellow, wasn’t he?”

“Lord Trazayuya was known as the sage of the elves. He developed many magic tools and techniques. When the sage was in the labyrinth, lots of thieves and even whole nations sometimes targeted his property, according to my grandfather.”

So he wasn’t paranoid—he was just protecting himself.

“Even now, each time a new viceroy takes power, they send armed forces to attempt to take the manor by force.”

And it still hasn’t fallen? That’s pretty amazing.

“Couldn’t a group of high-level explorers break in here?”

“No one who lives in this city would ever attack the Ivy Manor.”

Lelillil answered Arisa’s question with extreme confidence.

“After all, the False Core in this mansion preserves the water source of the city.”

“Whoa, taking hold of the lifelines, huh? Nice one, Trazayuya. Guess they didn’t call him a sage for nothing.”

Arisa looked impressed.

Lelillil didn’t seem to know too many of the details, but this False Core was described in Trazayuya’s documents.

According to those, it was a magic tool designed after a City Core, made with the giant core of a level-50-or-higher monster and a considerable amount of Holytree Stone.

It was a pretty useful system: It absorbed magic from nearby sources to power the manor’s barrier and other magic devices, could operate connected magic devices from a distance, and so on.

Could it be...?

Does the False Core steal magic from the source that’s supposed to go to the City Core?

I wondered that at first, but when I continued to read the explanation, I found that was an unnecessary worry.

The False Core's power source was really magic that was supposed to flow into the labyrinth, so it was actually hindering the labyrinth's growth and protecting the city.

"But if politicians target this place, it might not be the best location for our base."

"That's true. We'd be fine inside the manor, but if anyone was seen wandering around outside, they might get held hostage or caught up in all kinds of trouble."

Arisa agreed with my concerns.

"But I do want to use the equipment here...", I mused.

"Why don't we buy a dummy house in the city and teleport in and out of here from that? You or I can just use our teleport magic."

"Good idea. Let's do that."

I could probably ask at the explorers' guild if they had any leads on a house we could buy for our purposes.

While we were here, I requested that Lelillil show me around Trazayuya's workshops.

"A mere human won't be able to use the equipment down here."

"It's all right. I used the underground laboratory in Bolenan Forest, too."

"Th-the sage's main headquarters...? I can't believe that senile old geezer allowed you in there."

Hey, you forgot to correct yourself on Gillil's title this time.

"Well, I was doing research to help save the World Tree from imminent danger."

Lelillil still looked doubtful, but she showed me to the control panel without further explanation, probably figuring she could test my mettle that way.

That was no problem—it was the same setup as the one in the underground

research lab in Bolenan Forest.

“Let’s see what kind of equipment we’ve got loaded in here first...”

“Hmph. So you can operate the panel at least, insolent whelp.”

Ignoring Lelillil’s muttering, I focused on satisfying my own curiosity.

There wasn’t quite as much machinery as the underground lab in Bolenan Forest had, but there were still elf-style giant Transmutation Tablets, cauldrons, and even cultivation tanks for fine-tuning homunculi. That was more than satisfying.

There was a magic device for formatting and engraving cores and Holytree Stones, too, albeit an older model. If I remembered right, this was the one even the elves avoided using because it was so hard to operate.

“...Excellent. I can make all kinds of magic tools with these.”

I’d found tons of rare materials in the labyrinth, so I wanted to get cracking right away, but it was probably best to refrain for now.

“Thank you, Lelillil. I’ll be back to use this machinery often, if that’s all right.”

“Just make sure you don’t destroy the sage’s precious equipment, all right, whelp?”

“Yes, of course.”

Once my little underground tour was through, we had a tea party on the terrace in the garden aboveground to celebrate our new acquaintance.

The *castellas* I served along with the tea were a huge hit with Lelillil.

Before we went back, I placed a Return seal slate, and we left the Ivy Manor behind for the time being.



“Are we going to buy a house next?”

“Yeah, I’m planning to see if the west explorers’ guild has a place we can stay.”

The explorers’ guild in the east probably had more openings, but I wanted a place with easy access to the labyrinth, so I chose the nearby west guild.

We followed a different path out of the forest area than the one we'd entered through and found soldiers stationed at the wall.

There hadn't been any at the entrance through the noble quarters, so I stuck my head out of the carriage window to address them.

"Did we need permission to come through this way?"

"Not at all, good sir! There are no restrictions on nobles' passage here."

I hadn't shown them any identification or anything. They must have gathered that I was a noble because I was coming from the direction of the nobles' quarters in a fancy guarded carriage.

There didn't seem to be any problems, and I apologized for distracting them from their duties and moved on.

Farther down the road, we found ourselves near the lively south gate.

This and the north gate seemed to be the entrances generally used by commoners and merchants, so there were plenty of carriages coming to and fro.

Many of them had escorts, probably because of the nature of Labyrinth City. In addition to runosaurs and horses, there were some ostrichlike birds and duldeer carrying riders or baggage.

"Livelyyyy?"

"Lots of shops, sir."

Tama and Pochi looked around excitedly, following the passersby with their eyes.

There were many merchant shops lining the main road from the south gate, along with some wholesale stores near the gate.

The stores marketed toward the wealthy could be found around the halfway point on the road leading toward the nobles' quarters.

"Mm, diverse."

"That's true. There are lots of beastfolk and a lot of nomads and Westerners, too."

It was a melting pot of races and peoples, in a different way from the old capital.

“...Thank you very much.”

I heard Lulu speaking from the coachman’s stand, so I peered out through the window.

A group of weaselfolk merchants had realized our carriage belonged to a noble and cleared a path for us.

I waved to them from the window, which seemed to startle them considerably. I guess most nobles didn’t bother greeting lowly merchants.

We continued along the castle wall and through an area of small farms and fields, emerging near a livestock ranch.

“Meeeat?”

“They look tasty, sir.”

Tama and Pochi pressed their faces to the window, staring at the livestock.

“Horses, sheep, and...is that Ohmi cattle?”

“It seems they’re a breed called ‘Celivera dullcattle.’”

Lulu was pointing at some round, short-legged cows.

According to a book I’d bought in the old capital, their meat was fatty and average-tasting, but they produced a great deal of delicious milk.

There seemed to be three different farms adjacent to one another here.

“Once we’ve found a place to live, let’s buy some milk and sausages here.”

“Yaaaay!”

“Hooray, sir!”

“Cheese too.”

I patted the excited young trio, nodding an affirmative to Mia’s request.

Moving on, we passed along a river near the farms, until eventually the labyrinth army’s base was visible on the left, protected by a high wall.

It wasn't a full-on fortress, but there were several towers equipped with large Magic Cannons.

There was even a wide field around the size of an average school's grounds in front of the garrison, possibly to serve as a potential battlefield.

The river flowed into a moat around the ramparts. This seemed to be the end of the stream.

We passed the garrison and crossed over a bridge, entering a residential area with what appeared to be low-income housing.

There were some foul-smelling butcheries and leatherworking shops near the river, which probably made this a less-than-ideal place to live.

The road to the explorers' guild was narrow and crowded, so we took a roundabout route to avoid the busy area.

"...Geh!"

Spotting a human figure below the bridge, I used my "Telescopic Sight" skill to investigate and found myself staring at some young female explorers bathing in the river.

They had put up a straw mat to conceal themselves, but there were way too many gaps in it.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, it's no big deal."

It might seem meddlesome, but once we crossed the bridge, I had Arisa and Nana give the group a large waterproof blanket with which to hide themselves properly.



"Watch the cart while we're gone, please."

"Yes, master."

Leaving the cart in the parking area of the west guild, I took Arisa and Nana with me into the building.

It would probably be pretty busy inside, and I didn't want to leave the cart

unattended, so I decided to keep our numbers to a minimum.

I brought Arisa to help with negotiations and Nana to protect Arisa in case an incident broke out.

“It’s not quite as crowded as last time.”

Arisa was right: The west guild had been like a train station at rush hour last time, but now it was a fairly normal level of crowded.

Isn’t that...?

On the other side of the crowd, I saw Acting Viceroy Sokell, who we’d encountered at the government building, swaggering around with his guard. There was an attractive office-lady type next to him with a similarly haughty face.

He was pushing through the busy hallway like he owned the place, causing trouble for the explorers around him.

No need to poke a hornet’s nest today.

I didn’t want him to give us any trouble, so I quietly blended in with the crowd.

“Master, I have located wanted posters, I report.”

“Looks like they’ve got bounties and everything.”

Close to the entrance was a board lined with papers showing likenesses, names, and bounties for various criminals.

“Plunderers, huh? A hundred gold coins, dead or alive—that’s pretty hefty.”

Arisa was pointing at a plunderer called Plunderer King Ludaman wearing a mask that covered the right half of his face. The name sounded kind of familiar, but I was probably just imagining it.

There was quite a bit of variety among the other posters: I saw one for a pretty woman with the name Derrin the Dagger Princess and another for a big, stout man called Gumu the Human Bullet.

“We’ll simply catch them if we see them.”

I could easily distinguish them by searching for “plunderer” on my map, but I

made a note of the wanted criminals' names in the memo section of my networking tab, just in case.

"I wish they'd hang some big signs from the ceiling to show where things are."

"The deployment of resources here has room for reassessment, I concur."

There were lots of small signs posted on the pillars to indicate different locations, but if you weren't tall enough, they would be impossible to see around the crowds of people.

The west guild was similar in design to the east guild, but there wasn't any space on the floor for negotiation, and a green courtyard was visible farther inside. Unlike the chaotic lobby, there was hardly anyone to be seen in the courtyard. Containing a stylish open terrace, it appeared to be a space for nobles and high-level explorers.

"Hmm? Isn't that Princess Meetia chatting with those hotties on the terrace?"

"Looks that way."

Her strict guardian knight didn't seem to be with her today.

Not wanting to get in the way of her potential romance, I proceeded along the path past the terrace without interrupting her.

"Sir Satou! And Arisa, too!"

However, Princess Meetia spotted us and hopped up and down, waving happily.

She didn't include Nana's name, though. They hadn't really gotten to interact, since Nana was on a runosaur at the time.

"How is thy explorer life going? It must be exciting, no?"

"Yes, very much so."

Between all the new foods and our secret labyrinth base, it was safe to say that the explorer life was treating us quite well.

"It appears that my companions have returned, so I shall take my—"

"Wait a moment, Sir Jelil! I ought to introduce thee to mine friends, no?"

The man Princess Meetia was speaking with was none other than Mr. Jelil, the leader of the Red Dragon's Roar party we saw not long after we left the labyrinth.

I had never seen the other person before, but his name was Zarigon, the leader of an explorer party called the Hellfire Fangs.

He was a ruggedly handsome fellow and considerably strong at level 39.

With my "Keen Hearing" skill, I heard Arisa mutter "<Zakorin?>" in Japanese next to me, mixing up his name with the Japanese word for *small fry*. If I called him by the wrong name, it would be her fault.

"And this is Sir Satou Pendragon, a knight of the Muno Barony."

"So you're Sir Pendragon? I've heard about you from Sir Masaki, the Hero of the Saga Empire."

Surprise registered on Mr. Jelil's handsome features.

Masaki was the family name of Hayato the Hero.

I was a little curious what Hayato might have said about me.

"Hmm, so this is Pendragon... Looks like a cheeky twerp to me."

Zarigon, on the other hand, looked down at me dismissively.

It didn't seem like we'd be close friends anytime soon. I decided to mute him and speak to Mr. Jelil instead.

First, though, I warned Arisa and Nana via the Space Magic Telephone spell not to cause a fuss.

"Was Sir Hero in Labyrinth City?" Arisa inquired.

"Yes, he investigated the labyrinth a little, then took his follower with him and left. I believe he said they were going to Parion Province next."

Jelil's voice was certainly calming. Speaking to him up close, I could see how beefy his chest and arms were, too.

"Oh? That sword... Was it made by the dwarves of Bolehart, by any chance?"

Mr. Jelil looked at my fairy sword's scabbard with a genuine smile.

The red-scabbard sword at his waist was from Bolehart, too—in fact, it was made by Zajuul, the top apprentice of Elder Dohal, who made my sword.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I thought as much! I’ve never seen that seal before, but judging by that workmanship, it must have been made by one of Elder Dohal’s best pupils.”

No, I actually made this sword with Elder Dohal. I didn’t want to say that to him when he was in such high spirits, though, so I decided to avoid the subject.

“Is your sword of Bolehart make as well, Sir Jelil? It looks as if it was made by one of the best.”

“That’s right!” Jelil took the bait with a bright grin. “This sword was specially made for me by Master Zajuul, Elder Dohal’s best apprentice! Most Bolehart swords use a mithril alloy, but this one is particularly special. It’s made with a touch of bronze, blue steel, and scarlet ore, and...”

Too much.

Too much information, Mr. Jelil.

From the sound of things, I had accidentally set him off on a nerdy subject.

Giving up, I listened respectfully to his long rant. The topic was actually pretty interesting to me, so it wouldn’t be that painful anyway.

In fact, I was a bit disappointed when his friends came over to get him.

“Jelil! We’re ready.”

“All right, I’m coming! Pardon me, Lady Meetia, but I must take my leave.”

“Very well. I wish thee luck in your conquest of the areamaster, no?”

Excusing himself, Mr. Jelil hurried over to his comrades.

The atmosphere around us seemed to relax a little.

“Are they hoping for treasure?”

“You must know this, Arisa, no? The core of an areamaster is required to attain qualification to battle a floormaster, no?”

Wow, it’s just like a quest chain in a game.

“Hmph! We Hellfire Fangs will defeat the areamaster long before they do.”

“Yes, I wish thee luck, too, Sir Zarigon.”

Princess Meetia grinned encouragingly at the preening Zarigon, who turned red and walked away with light steps, carrying his sword triumphantly.

Maybe Zarigon was actually a lolicon.

“Lady Meetia, how is your work going?” Arisa inquired politely.

“Well enough, no? Sir Sokell stopped us from healing the viceroy’s daughter, but now that the viceroy and his wife have returned, we can finally begin.”

He was preventing the viceroy’s daughter from being healed?

Sokell had given me a bad impression when we first met, so I figured he might be up to no good, but I’d dismissed him as nothing more than a minor pest. I should’ve been more careful.

“Lady Meetia, have you had any troubles with life in Labyrinth City thus far?”

“Life in the guesthouse is more than satisfactory, no? That pompous Sir Sokell is a trifle difficult to get along with, but worse...”

Princess Meetia hesitated for a second.

Her tone sounded more like anxiety than dissatisfaction to me.

“...there is simply something about Sir Poputema, no? I cannot help but feel a shiver when he doest look my way. I am told that it is his history in teaching that makes him seem to look down on others in his words and actions, and yet...”

I could understand that. It was hard when you had a gut negative reaction to someone.

“No, I mustn’t. I am simply still too inexperienced, that is all, no? By the by, Arisa...”

Looking ashamed for having spoken ill of others, Princess Meetia started talking to Arisa about interesting places in Labyrinth City instead.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Your Highness!”

Just then, the squire girl came running over, bandages wrapped around her

head and arms.

She seemed to be guarding Princess Meetia today, not the strict knight.

“Were they able to heal thee?”

“Yes, madam! Sir Sokell was there, too, so I informed him that we were attacked by ruffians in the street.”

Attacked? Was that why Mr. Jelil and company were with her?

“Were you hurt, Your Highness?”

“Nay, I am unharmed. Ryula protected me.”

According to Princess Meetia, they were attacked by some well-dressed young hoodlums in masks.

They hadn’t tried to steal anything, leaving me to wonder who had attacked her and why.

I doubted it was out of any lascivious intent, unless they were lolicons like Zarigon.

Before long, Princess Meetia’s nursemaid and the stern knight arrived, too.

“Princess! I thought I might find you in a place like this yet again.”

“Ryula, are you hurt?”

The two didn’t appear to know about the attack.

“Now that thou are here, perhaps we had best return to the guesthouse. Sir Satou, Arisa, until we meet again, no?”

Once Princess Meetia left with her guardians, we went to the service window to secure a dwelling of our own.



“These areas should meet your requirements, Sir Knight.”

The man in charge of the guild’s real estate department pointed at a few spots in Labyrinth City.

There were three options: a former mercantile on the main street near the nobles’ gate, a studio space in the artisan district, and a house said to have

been used by a noble's lover.

"The house in the nobles' quarters will be the most secure, but that place is under the jurisdiction of the viceroy's office, so you would have to go through them."

I read over the piece of paper containing information on the three spaces.

The former mercantile was far away from the west guild, and the workshop would be near the unpleasant-smelling butcheries and leather workshops. That left the former lover's home by process of elimination.

It was a little small, but we would be using it only as a relay point to the Ivy Manor, so that wasn't a big deal.

"Hey, what about this place?"

Arisa was looking at a file in a stack that the clerk had put aside.

Glancing over the information, I saw that it was a noble's former vacation house, close to the farms and fields. It was cheap, too. However, due to it being empty for more than ten years, the process of renting it might be a little complicated.

"I-I'm afraid there are certain circumstances regarding that particular location..."

The clerk explained that there was a curse on the noble who originally built the house, and even the highest-ranking priests in the area couldn't undo it.

"That's quite a curse."

"Yes, it's said it was left by the Undead King who brought down the Muno Marquisate."

Zen?!

I remembered the skull-faced man who was Nana's former master and who had once kidnapped Mia.

"Then was the former owner of that house...?"

"Yes, he was the nephew of Marquis Muno... I have heard that all the residents of the home were found dead in a frightful mummified state."

The people who next lived in the house were discovered on the verge of death, as well.

The curse even affected the surrounding area, impacting the health of everyone living nearby, until finally the house was surrounded by nothing but empty homes and unused land.

“There were no problems with the farm behind it, but since it was next to a cursed house, they had difficulty selling any dairy or meat.”

That's some serious rumor power.

According to my map, the house in question did seem to have a pretty serious curse on it.

Most likely, it was the same kind of curse as the one that was on the basement of Munro Castle.

“All right. I'll take it.”

“You cannot be serious!”

“Yes, I am. As a vassal of Baron Munro, I cannot simply stand by and let a house with a connection to the Munro family fall to a curse.”

The clerk tried to dissuade me, but one of his managers came along and boomed at him to make up the contract.

“Sir Pendragon, would you like to buy the surrounding empty land and houses as well? This would be the total price for the lot of them. Might you consider it?”

“Let me think...”

The manager seemed to want to do away with the whole lot of problem locations, so Arisa and I bargained with him until we managed to get the price down lower than the cheapest of the initial three locations we'd been shown.

They must have really wanted to be rid of this place...

“All right, we have a deal.”

I produced the money from my Garage Bag and received the deeds and keys to the houses in exchange. Thanks to the clerk having the “Contract” skill, we

were able to complete the registration proceedings on the spot.

I shook hands with the satisfied-looking manager and left the guild behind us.

As for the real estate tax, it depended on the location and scale of the land involved. In this case, we would be exempt for the first three years, and from the fourth year on, it would still be considerably cheap.

The price would probably go up eventually, but it was still far cheaper than any mansion in the nobles' quarters, so there was nothing to worry about.



"Are you sure you're okay with a cursed house?"

"Of course. I broke the curse in the Muno Castle basement. I should be fine."

At that, Arisa's concerned expression finally turned back into a smile.

We took the carriage back along the road we'd taken and headed straight for our new house.

"Geh, it's totally overgrown!"

The mansion was thick with weeds, much to Arisa's dismay.

"We've got thiiiis?"

"We're fully equipped for weeding, sir!"

"This is my new death-to-weeds scythe, I report."

Pochi and Tama produced weed-cutting sickles from their pouches and struck a pose. Even Nana pulled out a long-handled sickle.

I opened the large padlock across the gate with the key I'd been given.

"Looks like it's gotten a little rusty."

I would have to put some lubricating oil on it later.

"Lulu, we're blocking the road. Could you bring the carriage onto the premises, please?"

"Yes, master."

As Lulu steered the carriage onto the grounds, I looked around at the state of the mansion.

There was enough miasma in the garden to be harmful to the health, so I put my spirit light on full throttle to purge it all away. The main source of the miasma was in the main wing of the house.

...Hmm?

There were no less than five children in the barn on the premises. They were probably young drifters squatting in the unused house.

Because their levels were low, I decided to have the weed-cutting team take a look.

“Nana, take Tama and Pochi and investigate the barn, please.”

“Yes, master.”

“Rogerrrr!”

“Sir!”

The trio cut a path through the weeds on their way to the barn.

“Liza and Mia, could you look at the well, please?”

“Understood, sir.”

“Mm.”

Liza had a long-handled scythe to match Nana’s, so they both cut through the weeds as they went.

“Now, then...”

I looked around at the wide-open grounds. It was larger than I’d imagined from the area numbers in the paperwork.

There was a garden as big as any noble’s mansion. It would be a bit of a pain to weed the whole thing by ourselves.

“Arisa and Lulu, could you hire some help?”

“Help, sir?”

“You want to outsource the weeding and the cleaning, I bet!”

Lulu didn’t seem to understand, but Arisa knew what I meant right away.

“There were some kids sitting in front of the west guild who didn’t have jobs, so I’ll go grab them! I’m sure they’ll be eager to help if we offer to cook them dinner.”

I would’ve felt bad having them do manual labor for nothing but food. I decided to pay them the standard daily wage as well.

“How many do you think we need?”

“Let’s see... I want to finish the weeding by the end of the day, so maybe ten or so. A little more or less than that is fine.”

“Okey-dokey! I’ll hire all the kids who can come.”

“Great, thank you.”

With all this extra space, even two or three times the number wouldn’t be a problem.

After I’d seen off the sisters, I went into the main wing of the mansion alone.

Miasma leaked out as soon as I opened the door, but I purified it all with my Spirit Vision.

“Over there, huh?”

Muttering to myself, I used “Skylarking” to head farther inside without touching the dust-covered floor.

“Looks like it’s coming out of the basement.”

Inside what appeared to be the former master’s study was a door that had been boarded up haphazardly. I forced it open and proceeded downstairs.

There was so much miasma down there that even my spirit light couldn’t purify it completely, so I used a Holy Stone from Storage to do the job.

When I reached the bottom, a dark, transparent shadow emerged from the floor.

“Intruder. I am a shadow of the Undead King Zen.”

This one was even blurrier than the shadow in the basement of Muno Castle.

My AR display called it a **Curse Soul**. This must be the core of the curse, then.

Changing my title to Hero, I pulled out a handmade Holy Sword from Storage.

I would've liked to use Gjallarhorn, the Holy Sword I received from Zen and used to send him and his shadow in the castle on to the next life, but I had already returned that to the Shiga Kingdom.

Zen had a deep grudge against Shiga, which was why I decided on one of my own personal swords instead of using the Shigan Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis.

"Zen has already passed on, as has your colleague in Muno Castle. It's time for your role to come to an end, too."

With that, I flourished my sword at the curse soul, which had probably been forgotten even by its creator.

As soon as the holy blue light of the sword touched the shadow, it disappeared like a mirage.

I couldn't be sure if it had passed on peacefully, but my log showed that the curse soul had been destroyed, so the curse that had eaten away at anyone who lived here should be gone as well.

Sure enough, the incredibly thick miasma had faded to a point where even my Spirit Vision could disperse it.

Before too long, all the miasma in the house should be gone.

"Problemooo!"

"There's a big problem, sir!"

When I stepped out of the mansion, I saw Tama and Pochi running over from the barn.

"Emergency, I report! A life is in extremely terrible danger. Immediate relief needed, I request."

Nana poked her head out from the barn and shouted to me.

I guess the young vagrants weren't just ordinary squatters.

"Hurrrrrrry!"

"This way, sir!"

Tama and Pochi led me into the barn, where some grade school-aged kids were slumped in the shadows.

“They seem awfully feeble.”

As I looked at the children, I investigated their condition with the AR display.

By default, the map displayed only race and level, and normally an area search showed only the results’ names, ages, races, genders, and levels.

I’d adjusted it so that all the information wouldn’t take up my field of vision.

Any targets that were enemies, criminals, had unknown skills, or were level 40 or above were highlighted in different colors.

“What do you think? I inquire.”

“Well, I don’t think their lives are in danger, at least.”

However, they were weakened to a dangerous degree. They probably hadn’t eaten much in a long time.

It looked like they weren’t drinking enough water, either. Their consciousnesses were so fuzzy that only one of them reacted when we came in, and even that one didn’t show any signs of moving.

I took out some of the nutritional supplement potions that had been so popular with the hardworking elves and watered them down a bit before administering them to the kids.

Since they were so small and frail, I thought the normal concentration might be hazardous to their health.

“Huuurt?”

“Looks painful, sir.”

Tama and Pochi stared at the children with concern.

They were in a bad way: Many of them had bone fractures, injuries that were starting to develop gangrene, and lacerations festering with pus.

Clearly, Zen’s curse and the miasma weren’t the only causes of their weakness.

“I’ll heal them—don’t worry.”

I used Recovery Magic to start fixing up the children’s wounds, some of which had bones that had healed wrong, causing contusions. Potions and Recovery Magic couldn’t heal such old wounds.

Still, at this rate, they would have a hard time walking.

Keeping in mind the flow of magic from the “Self-Healing” skill, I attempted to heal their bodies.

“Nnn, nnngh...”

It seemed to hurt a little, but at least it had gone well.

> Skill Acquired: “Magic Heal”

> Title Acquired: Spirit Healer I acquired a useful-looking new skill, so I activated it and set my new title as I continued healing the kids’ wounds.

The maxed-out skill turned out to be very effective: By carefully manipulating my magic, I was able to restore their bones to their normal states.

“They should be fine now.”

“But they have not regained consciousness, I report.”

“That’s just because they’re tired from the healing. Let’s let them rest for a little while, then give them water and another nutritional supplement potion. Tomorrow morning, we can feed them some thin rice porridge.”

“Incredible, master. You are truly the greatest, I praise!”

“Hooray!”

“Thank you, sir!”

I left Nana in charge of nursing the kids back to health.

I didn’t want to leave them lying on the ground, so I produced a fluffy felt-lined sheet from Storage that we used for camping and put it under them.

Just then, Liza and Mia came running inside.

“Master, we heard Tama and Pochi shouting. Is everything all right?”

“Satou?”

“It’s all fine now.”

“Some children who were taking shelter here were weakened by the curse.”
Giving them an abbreviated explanation, I asked about the state of the well.

“The well required some repairs.”

“Mm. Pulley decayed.”

As we spoke, I accompanied them back to the well, along with Tama and Pochi.

The broken remains of the pulley were lying on the ground, and a bucket with rope was resting next to the cover that kept junk from getting into the well.

The bucket looked a little wet; most likely, the children had been using it.

I used Magic Hand to put the garbage in the well into Storage together with the water, separated out the garbage into a Junk folder, and repeated the process until the well was full of clean water.

“This should do the trick for now, I think. We can hire a professional to take care of the rest.”

With that, I unlocked the back door to the kitchen.

“This is going to be difficult to clean.”

The dust was even worse than the main wing. It was clear that no one had been here for ten years.

“Explore.”

“Want me to go in first?”

“I’ll do it.”

Mia excitedly led the charge into the kitchen, with Tama and Pochi in tow.

That didn’t last long, however.

“Satooou.”

“Spiderweeebs?”

“So sticky, sir.”

Mia came running back with tears in her eyes and spiderwebs in her hair; Pochi was in a similar state, her ears flat on her head.

Tama hadn't been caught, but I still had to calm the three of them down before we made another investigation attempt.

With me in the lead this time, of course.

I used Magic Hand to touch the spiderwebs and mountains of dust and put them away in the Junk folder in Storage.

“The stove still looks usable.”

“Is this black stuff coal?”

The stove was full of black piles of what appeared to be coal, as well as ash. It would probably be better to replace the other equipment with magic tools.

“Lots of rooooms?”

The main building was three stories, as well as an attic and a basement. Excluding those, the total square footage of the building was probably around ten thousand square feet, almost ten times bigger than the average modern Japanese home.

“Lots of chairs and bureaus, too, sir.”

There was a ton of garbage in the attic and basement especially, like broken chairs and tables. Again, I used my Magic Hand to put them in Storage, which was nice and easy.

“There's quite a bit of usable furniture here.”

“Mm, sturdy.”

After exploring the rooms, we found that aside from one area where the floor was rotted, there wasn't too much work to be done besides cleaning away the dust and cobwebs.

There was a lot of expensive-looking furniture still intact, too, so we probably needed to replace things only in the kitchen and the main bedrooms.

“Basemeeent?”

“I smell cheese and dried meat, sir.”

The cellar connected to the hallway seemed to serve as an emergency shelter and food storehouse. There were areas for casks and even wine shelves.

The basement where I’d purified the curse soul before didn’t seem to be connected to this one.

I decided to use that basement to set the seal slate for the Return spell. Maybe I could make a research lab there, just for show?

“Looks like the cellar is connected to the main hallway and the kitchen.”

There were two sets of stairs, the second of which led to the kitchen.

“I think that’s it. There doesn’t seem to be a bathroom.”

“Yes. What a shame.”

Liza loved baths, so she seemed disappointed.

For her sake as well as mine, I decided to sacrifice one of the first-floor rooms to add a bathroom.

“We’ll have to make a new one, then.”

“Yes, master!”

Liza perked up immediately with a big smile.

There was probably no bathroom because water was a precious resource, but for a Japanese person, a house really wasn’t complete without a place to bathe.

Like I did with the labyrinth vacation home, I could probably have Arisa carve out a large tree trunk with Space Magic to make a big wooden bath.

It looked like the Space Magic spell Create Bathtub I’d created would come in handy once again.



“Heeeave?”

“Ho, sir!”

Tama and Pochi had started weeding in the garden, and Liza was checking on Nana and the children.

“Satou.”

“What is it, Mia?”

Mia tugged on my sleeve from behind me.

She wanted to go to the Ivy Manor, so I set a Return seal slate at the mansion’s entrance and teleported us to the Ivy Manor.

“Lelill, clean.”

“This broken-down old house, Lady Misanaria?”

“Mm.”

As it turned out, Mia wanted to go to fetch Lelillil here. She was a house fairy and had the “Cleaning” skill, so she probably would be helpful.

“Satou.”

“What is it?”

“Turn the pretty on.”

“All right.”

She was asking me to unleash my spirit light, which I normally kept suppressed.

There wasn’t any more miasma in the mansion, but Mia probably had some reason for asking, so I did as she requested.

“Mm, pretty.”

Because Lelillil didn’t have the Spirit Vision gift, she was just confused.

“Lelill, House Magic.”

“A-as you wish, Lady Misanaria.”

Lelillil obediently began a lengthy chant.

“■■■■■■■■■■.....■■■■■■■■■■ ***House Cleaning le Senjou.***”

When the long chant finally ended, the room was sparkling clean. Curious, I raised my foot and found that somehow the spell had even cleaned the spot I was standing on.

For some reason, Lelillil was also staring around at the clean floors and windows, as if she'd never seen her own spell before.

> Skill Acquired: "Spirit Magic: House Fairy"

Apparently, the magic Mia had called "House Magic" was actually a kind of Spirit Magic.

So Lelillil could use Spirit Magic, even though she couldn't see spirits. I thought Miss Lua the elf had told me that you couldn't use Spirit Magic unless you had Spirit Vision...

Maybe Lelillil acquired the "Spirit Magic: House Fairy" skill as an innate skill or a gift?

"Great."

"Th-thank you for your kind word, my lady... However, it appears that my magic was more effective than usual."

"Mm."

Most likely it was the spirits that gathered around my spirit light that had boosted the effect, but Mia didn't seem too motivated to explain. I kept my mouth shut.

If she wanted to explain it as a surprise later, I didn't want to ruin it.

"Next."

"J-just a moment, please, Lady Misanaria. Unlike the blessed elves, we have precious little power. That spell used most of mine. I will not be able to use magic for some time."

"Mm, Satou."

Lelillil looked apologetic as Mia tugged my sleeve again.

She probably wanted me to use Mana Transfer to restore Lelillil's magic power.

I didn't particularly mind, so I went ahead and did so.

"Huh? What was that? What did you do to me, wh...? Erm, Mr. Satou?"

“I restored your magic, since Mia asked.”

“Restored it? This much?” Lelillil looked perplexed, but she used other strange spells like Clean Up House and Heal House at Mia’s request, until the whole mansion looked like new.

Even the areas where there had been holes in the walls and floors were closed up. It must be some kind of Healing Magic, although I was a little unclear on how it worked.

“This is very impressive.”

“Mm, amazing.”

“Why, thank you very much.”

Lelillil blushed a little at our compliments, but she did seem proud of her work.

“Let’s do the outside next!”

The brownie was raring to clean the outside now, too, but I stopped her, asking her to leave it as it was.

“The leaky roof and such are a problem, but I’d like to keep it that way for now, please. This doesn’t seem to be any ordinary magic, so I wouldn’t want to surprise people too much.”

“I simply don’t understand you humans. Surely you have a difficult time following their foolish logic, too, Lady Misanaria?”

“Mm.”

Lelillil being rude was nothing new, but shouldn’t Mia have disagreed or defended me instead of nodding in agreement?

At any rate, Lelillil looked a little grouchy about having been stopped when her enthusiasm was high.

Since she was here, I decided to ask her to help with something else instead.

“I’d like to ask for help with the guesthouse and annex, too, but...”

Aside from the main building, the grounds also contained a separate guesthouse and an annex for servants and help to live in. The guesthouse was

two floors, while the annex was one.

The annex consisted of many small rooms, several of which held bureaus and wooden bed frames.

“...maybe we should save that for another day?”

“Lelill, you can do it.”

“Yes, my lady! As long as you keep the magic coming, I’ll take care of the rest!”

Mia’s encouragement set Lelillil’s enthusiasm aflame; just as I requested, she cleaned and repaired all the extra buildings.

Leaving the exhausted Lelillil in the main wing, I went back to the barn.

As soon as the beastfolk girls saw me, they followed me back in.

“Looks like the kids have recovered a little.”

The color had returned somewhat to the children’s skin, so I used Everyday Magic to clean them up.

“Let’s change their clothes and get them to the main wing, then, shall we?”

“Yes, master.”

“Allow me to help.”

Nana and Liza changed the kids’ clothing, and Tama and Pochi carried them on a stretcher.

I set up some simple beds in one of the now-clean rooms, allowing the kids to rest there.

As we were putting the last kid into a bed, I saw Arisa and company on my radar.

“All right, we’re here!”

Lulu was leading her horse and Arisa riding on hers. They had brought twenty-odd children with them.

Around half of them were human, while the rest were assorted beastfolk like weaselfolk and rabbitfolk.

“Welcome back. That’s more than I expected.”

“Yeah, we got a big flood of applicants, so I decided to hire them all.” Arisa shrugged, then raised her eyebrows. “Boy, Tama and Pochi, you really went all out. Weren’t these kids supposed to weed that area?”

“Hee-hee...”

“We worked hard, sir.”

I couldn’t blame Arisa for being surprised.

The pair of them had already cut the weeds on more than half of the expansive grounds.

However, there was still the thick growth covering the front yard, as well as some smaller places that needed to be taken care of, so it wasn’t as if there was no work left at all.

“Little kids, you’ll take these gloves and baskets and gather up the weeds in the places that have already been cut! Big kids, take gloves and sickles and cut the weeds around the mansion!”

“Heh-heh, gloves...”

“Wow, these are nice!”

The children collected their gloves from Lulu, putting them on and showing them to one another excitedly.

“But, Miss Arisa, if we wear these gloves while we’re picking up weeds, the gloves will get dirty.”

The eldest girl seemed to be nervous about the prospect of dirtying the gloves.

“It’s all right. If you’re pulling weeds without gloves, you could hurt your hands.”

“B-but...”

“If you hurt your hands, you won’t be able to work as well tomorrow, right?”

“R-right... Okay.”

Arisa's explanation seemed to reassure her somewhat, but she still looked worried about whether it was really okay to get the gloves dirty.

"All right, let's get to work! If you finish by sundown, master will make some delicious food for all of you!"

""""Food!""""

"Let's do this!"

""""Yeah!""""

Cheering at Arisa's motivational speech, the kids got right to work.

Once she was satisfied that the children were working, Arisa took a deep breath and walked over to me.

"Oh? If it isn't Lelillil," she said, noticing the house fairy resting behind me. "If this little lady's here, does that mean the house is already clean, by any chance?"

"Miss Arisa, I believe I asked you at the tea party to stop calling me 'little lady'!"

"Oh yeah, sorry."



Brushing off Lelillil's protests, Arisa walked inside.

"Wow, great job, Lelillil! Brownies sure are amazing. We really owe you one!"

With a twirl, Arisa gave Lelillil a big thumbs-up.

Lelillil puffed out her chest; she seemed to be the type of person who let compliments go to her head.

Oh right.

I'd better tell Arisa and Lulu about the kids we took in while they were gone.

"Lulu! Could you come into the mansion, please?"

I called to Lulu, who was taking care of the horses outside.

"Right away, master." Lulu came hurrying in. "Goodness, the floors are sparkling clean!"

As Lulu expressed her surprise, Lelillil puffed out her chest proudly again.

"Oh? Hello there, Miss Lilellei."

"Excuse me, you little tart! I told you my name is Lelillil!"

"Oh dear. But I believe I also told you that my name is Lulu, not 'little tart.' Have you forgotten already?"

These two didn't seem to get along very well.

Lelillil was like this with nearly everyone but Mia, but it was unusual to see the mild-mannered Lulu pick a fight with anyone.

According to Arisa, the reason for Lulu's hostility was Lelillil's rudeness toward me.

I was a little worried, but Arisa had optimistically reassured me that they'd "probably get along soon enough."

Since Lelillil couldn't leave the Ivy Manor unattended for too long, I gave her some sweet honey pastries as a gift and sent her back with Teleportation Magic.

I decided to invite her to dinner later that night and treat her to a home-cooked meal as thanks for her help.



While the children were cleaning up the rest of the weeds, I took Lulu and Liza with me to Viscount Siemmen's residence, where I gave a letter to the maid to pass on the information that we had changed addresses.

I brought the two of them along so that they could learn the way to and from the house.

I wanted to go around the neighborhood and greet the locals, too, but since our new mansion was famous for being under Zen's curse, I decided to wait until we had spent the night there safely.

Upon my return, I went around and bought some small goods and supplies we needed for the new house.

Along the way, I went to a merchant the commerce guild had introduced me to, and I hired him to deliver letters to Zena in Seiryuu City, Miss Karina in the Muno Barony, and some other friends in the old capital and other places.

"Lulu, can you stop in front of that temple?"

There was an assortment of temples near the rotary that connected the north-south main road with the street to the nobles' quarters, so I decided to visit and make some donations.

Lulu and Liza stayed with the carriage in a parking area behind one of the temples.

"These are pretty nicely decorated."

Stepping into one of the temples, I was surprised to see that the building was just as ornate as the ones in the noble quarters of the old capital.

They probably had some pretty wealthy patrons to be able to make such a fancy temple.

"Peace be with you, young gentleman. What might bring you here today?"

A high-ranking priest in a fancy robe approached me, rubbing his hands together like a sleazy merchant.

"My, what a splendid sword you have! Perhaps you are an explorer, then, my young friend?"

The sharp-eyed priest noticed the fairy sword at my waist, and his eyes glittered.

“Yes, although we’ve only entered the labyrinth once so far.”

“...Then you must be seeking a priest to accompany you into the labyrinth!”

At my answer, disappointment crossed the priest’s face for a moment, but he quickly recovered his smile as he entered into a sales pitch.

“Unfortunately, priests with the ‘Holy Magic’ skill can only be employed by garnet-badge holders or above.”

“No, I wasn’t really—”

“However!”

I started to say that I wasn’t looking for any such service, but the man quickly interrupted me.

“We have just the thing for the party of a promising young gentleman such as yourself. A purehearted, dutiful, and *very good-looking* priestess!”

For some reason, he put a lot of emphasis on the “very good-looking” part.

The priest beckoned, and a graceful young beauty in priestess’s clothes appeared.

She was only level 3 and didn’t have “Holy Magic” or any other combat-oriented skills—only the “Service” skill, in fact.

The smiling young priestess was very cute, but since I was accustomed to Lulu’s supreme beauty, it didn’t move my heart in the slightest.

“Just a moment, please. I’ve only come today to make a donation.”

“A donation, young sir? You do not appear to be injured in any way... Do you perhaps require a house call?”

Why would you assume that?

“No, I do not need any such thing, thank you. I have yet to visit a temple since coming to Celivera, so I simply wished to make a donation.”

At that, the priest stared for a moment as though I were an alien creature,

then finally hurried off to get the person in charge of donations.

I thought that perhaps this temple was just unusual, but the other ones I visited all reacted in the same way.

Evidently, it was unusual for anyone in this city to make a donation without expecting something in return.

I asked around, but none of the temples did any soup kitchens or anything of the sort. At best, they offered very basic provisions in exchange for doing odd jobs for the temple.

I was beginning to get concerned with the way this city treated its poor.



“All right, Lulu. Shall we start preparing dinner?”

“Yes, master!”

The weeding was finished by sundown. As promised, I started cooking a meal for the kids.

Some of the older kids offered to help, so I had them wash vegetables, peel them, and other such simple jobs.

“Meat!”

“So much of it, ahhh!”

The kids who were cleaning up the tools noticed the wolf meat I was planning to use for steak tips and exclaimed excitedly.

Liza had suggested that tougher meat like wolf would be more filling and satisfying than the soft frog meat, so I decided to break out some of the stock I hadn’t used in a while.

“Wow, it smells so good...”

“Do you think we’ll get some, too?”

“Don’t be stupid. That’s only for those other kids.”

“Ours is probably those potatoes, right?”

“Potatoes, huh...?”

Noticing the hopping potatoes waiting to be fried, the kids' enthusiasm sank considerably.

I had used Treespirit Pearls to remove the harsh bitterness from these, though, making them different from the potatoes normally eaten in Labyrinth City.

I was looking forward to the surprise on these kids' faces.

"What's that red stuff? Smells sweet."

"I'm so hungry."

"I don't even mind if it's potatoes."

We didn't have any tables or chairs, so I distributed the food on lunch plates that I'd made using wooden boards and Treespirit Pearls.

The lunch plates contained gnocchi and lightly boiled leafy greens in a sweet-and-sour sauce, salted and fried potatoes, carrots with a sweet glaze, and a main course of wolf steak tips seasoned with salt and pepper and cooked in butter.

I'd chosen to include lots of vegetables to help with the kids' vitamin deficiencies.

I made one single dish of mushroom steak for Mia's main course, since she still didn't like the fatty taste of meat-based dishes.

"Ahhh..."

"Yummy!"

"I want another sip."

"Clean water is expensive, you dummy!"

"Wehhh, I'm sorry."

I passed around a bucket for the kids to wash their hands, but they were so thirsty that they started drinking from it instead. I guess I should have handed out mugs of water first.

I should've realized that, since the water I gave out while they were working was a pretty big hit.

“All right, everyone line up!”

Even when the food was done and it was time to hand out the plates, the kids still clustered at a distance, and Arisa ordered them to get in line.

I’d prioritized foods that were easy to make, so it shouldn’t be too extravagant for them.

“Wow, this whole feast is for us?”

“That’s amazing!”

“They’re not gonna change their minds, right? Right?!”

“Don’t even say that!”

The kids’ eyes sparkled with excitement.

As soon as they received their plates, the kids started digging in. Some of them shoved as much food in their mouths as they could possibly cram in, while others savored each bite carefully.

Strangely, not one of the kids said anything about how it tasted. They were all so desperately focused on eating that they couldn’t spare a moment to speak.

Some of them even wept as they ate.

I was glad they were happy, but I wished they would just eat normally.

“You’ve gotten really good at cooking, Lulu.”

“I hate to admit it, but it is good. Falling short at cooking to a mere human is a point of shame for a house fairy. Your sister is an odd one, Miss Arisa.”

“Oh my, Lelillil. Our master is even better, you know.”

“That wh— Erm, Mr. Satou is?”

“He’s the one who made those *castellas* we had in the afternoon.”

Lelillil was sitting next to Arisa for dinner.

These two seemed to get along surprisingly well. I hoped she would start getting along with Lulu.

When some of the smaller kids finished their food, they gazed at their plates sadly, so I gave them some of the fried frog skewers I’d made for the beastfolk

girls.

All of them seemed like they would eat as much as they were given. I had to cut them off before they got a stomachache.

Since our new home had so many rooms, I gave everyone their own, but the rest of my group started creeping into my room one by one, until we wound up sleeping in one big pile as usual.

Friendship is a beautiful thing, I suppose.

Thus, we spent our first night in our new home surrounded by one another's warmth.

The Banquet

Satou here. There's an old Japanese saying, "craft brings nothing home," and I think that holds true even today. For instance, in online strategy games, self-proclaimed "tacticians" tend to fall into traps more easily than newbies who don't know anything about the theories of the game.

"You bought a house, I'm told."

"Yes, a place that I happened to have some connection to was on the market, so I decided to purchase it."

The next morning after we bought the house, Viscount Siemmen brought me along in a carriage to visit the general of the labyrinth army and thank him for preparing troops to rescue me.

"Have you already hired help?"

"Not yet. We'll be spending a lot of time away from the house. I'd like to at least hire someone to watch the place while we're gone."

"Then I have a vassal who might be perfect for you. I'll introduce you before the banquet tonight."

"Thank you very much. That would be a great help."

"If you don't get a good impression, feel free to decline."

If I hired the wrong person, the viscount said, they might steal my things or misuse my house or other such things.

Oh right. I should talk to him about those scrolls before I forget.

"I apologize for bringing this up while we're traveling in a carriage, but..."

I offered Viscount Siemmen some papers containing the chant for Pixie Light, the firefly spell I'd come up with by combining Magic String and Mana Light.

"I cannot read spells, but judging by the confidence on your face, I have no doubt that this one is very fine indeed." Viscount Siemmen smiled at me. "Are you suggesting the same conditions of sale as the Fireworks spell? If this sells as well as that one, you'd be better off asking for a commission fee, in my

opinion...”

“No, the same conditions as before are fine.”

I already had more money than I knew what to do with, and this was my way of thanking the viscount for helping me out in so many ways, so that was enough for me.

While I was at it, I also requested that he make scrolls of two of the spells I made during our travels on the sugar route and three that I thought would be useful for exploring the labyrinth.

As we were discussing these things, the carriage reached the labyrinth army general’s garrison.

“Put that mithril sword from Elder Dohal on your waist.”

As he spoke, Viscount Siemmen put a thin sword in a delicately carved scabbard around his waist.

According to my AR display, it was the **Magic Sword Akatsuki** I’d sold at the black market in the old capital.

I didn’t know he was the person who had bought it. How nice.

“General Erthal tends to look down upon anyone who is not a fellow warrior.”

In the back of my mind, I pictured a muscular meathead guffawing around.

Just then, an officer appeared to guide us, along with several underlings.

“Oh? Hello again, young master.”

The guide was the foxfolk soldier who we’d met at the labyrinth entrance.

“You know each other?”

“Yes, he was kind enough to educate me about many things when I first entered the labyrinth.”

The foxfolk man led us to General Erthal’s office, with some young underlings carrying the gifts we’d brought.

And when we entered the room...

“Welcome. I am Honorary Count Arueton Erthal, the commander of the

labyrinth army.”

General Erthal was indeed a muscular, middle-aged man, but I couldn’t see him guffawing. He looked more like an arrogant noble with the kind of hook nose you’d see in a painting of a Roman military officer.

“Thank you for your assistance a few days ago, General Erthal.”

“Not at all. If you consider us even for your having indulged that selfish nephew of mine, that is more than enough for me.”

“I do wish Duke Vistall would stop this foolish rivalry with the Ougoch Duchy.”

“Impossible. Putting on such airs is a noble’s birthright.”

I had no idea what they were talking about, but it seemed to me like Viscount Siemmen and General Erthal were good friends.

Next, at Viscount Siemmen’s prompting, I introduced myself and gave my thanks as well, to which General Erthal responded with a smile.

“So you are Sir Pendragon, eh? The viscount says you are a living legend who carries the future of the Shiga Kingdom on your shoulders.”

I couldn’t help freezing up a little.

I don’t remember agreeing to carry anything like that...

“Indeed. It is thanks to him that the Muno Barony was saved from becoming a hotbed of demons, and he defeated lesser hell demons in Gururian City and the old capital with shockingly few casualties.”

Viscount Siemmen listed my achievements for General Erthal.

Which one was he talking about in the old capital? The one I beat at the Tenion Temple, maybe?

“His individual strength, as well as that of his party, is on par with any order of knights.”

Stop killing me with flattery, please. My poor “Poker Face” can only take so much.

“And he excels at the magical arts as well as in battle. He has developed many new spells, even Fireworks, a dazzling spell that delights all who witness it.”

“Oh? So this is the fellow who created that Fireworks spell, eh?”

General Erthal seemed to be taking the bait.

Were the Fireworks scrolls popular in Labyrinth City now, too?

“Why, thanks to his cooking and overall character serving as a balm on our people, the clashes between our political factions in my lord’s territory have simmered down. One hardly ever hears of assassinations and other such violence.”

Wait, I’m a balm now?

If there were assassinations in the peaceful duchy, maybe it had something to do with the demon lord–worshipping cult Wings of Freedom?

“If cooking is enough to change such things, I would have him do something about Marquis Ashinen, too.”

“You might be surprised. He even repaired the friendship between Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen.”

“What?! Those two? But they fought like cats and dogs!”

I had heard rumors that the gourmet-loving noble pair hadn’t gotten along well before, too.

As long as I’d personally known them, they’d seemed like the closest of friends, so it didn’t make much sense to me.

“By the by, is that the Magic Sword I asked about? Let me see it at once.”

“You may look but nothing more. It’s on loan from His Majesty the duke, after all.”

“Yes, I know.”

General Erthal drew the Magic Sword Akatsuki with the expression of a child who’d received a new toy.

“What a beautiful sword.”

It was a blue steel blade, plated with mithril. If I remembered right, I’d made it while messing around with my “Metalworking” skill.

“Is it a mithril blade?”

“No, according to Sir Ipasa, it lacks the unique weight variation of a mithril sword.”

“Just plating, then...”

That was a name I hadn’t heard in a while. Sir Ipasa was Marquis Lloyd’s son, an imperial knight of the Ougoch Duchy whom I’d befriended in our travels from the Muno Barony to the old capital.

“...This is incredible. I’ve never seen a magic blade that produces ‘Spellblade’ so easily.”

General Erthal produced a red light around the Magic Sword.

“I should love to fight even one strong monster with such a wonderful sword as this...”

“My apologies, but I’m afraid I don’t have the authority to permit that. You’ll have to ask Duke Ougoch directly at the kingdom meeting on the dawn of the new year.”

General Erthal’s face fell at Viscount Siemmen’s words.

“Our factions are different, after all. I suppose I shall have to give up... Hmm? Sir Pendragon, is that sword of Elder Dohal’s make?”

When his eyes fell on the fairy sword at my waist, the spark of excitement reappeared in his eyes.

“Yes, it is a mithril sword Elder Dohal was generous enough to forge for me.”

Since Trazayuya seemed to be a famous name in Labyrinth City, I decided not to mention that the sword was called the Fairy Sword Trazayuya.

He clearly wanted to touch the fairy sword, so I handed it over to the general.

“Oh-ho, a fine sword worthy of Elder Dohal’s seal. And a beautiful one, at that. It might even surpass that Magic Sword.”

The general produced “Spellblade” on the fairy sword and gave it a light swing.

“However, a mithril sword chooses its wielder.”

As he said that, I noticed that General Erthal's sword was also a mithril sword made by Elder Dohal, even if it didn't have his seal.

"A mithril blade is light without magic, but if one lacks the strength, it is impossible to swing it while putting enough magic into it to produce 'Spellblade.' And it gets heavier when it is supplied with more magic, so it is quite difficult to use."

That made sense. Even with my "One-Handed Sword" skill maxed out, it took a while to get used to using my fairy sword.

"In the hands of a master swordsman who can use a mithril blade properly, this sword would likely be stronger than the other."

With that, General Erthal put the fairy sword back in its sheath.

"However, if one can use 'Spellblade,' the Magic Sword would be the better choice. Its magic circuits are almost *too* perfect. I would recommend such a sword for anyone. If we had such a blade in large quantities, the Shiga Kingdom could fight even a demon lord's army."

I was grateful for the compliment to my sword, but I wished he wouldn't say such ominous things. What if a demon lord's army really did attack?

Although that was probably unlikely, since I defeated the Golden Boar Lord under the old capital, so another demon lord shouldn't appear for sixty-six years.

"Have I displeased you? If you have the skills to wield this mithril sword, then you would be more than a match for the duke's Magic Sword. You'll have to study hard."

"I will. Thank you for the advice."

Finally, the general added, "Lesser men would be sorely tempted to steal such a sword. Be careful not to let too many people see it."

Just as he was handing my fairy sword back to me, the door opened without even a knock.

"We brought you some food, General."

"It's from the gifts the viscount brought you."

The foxfolk soldier and the man he'd called "Captain" in the labyrinth entered. Surprisingly, the captain seemed to be the number-two man in the labyrinth army.

The plate was filled with some of the snacks I'd brought to go with the sweet wine.

Behind them, I saw underlings pushing wagons loaded with food and casks. Judging by the fact that they'd prepared enough for everyone, they seemed fully intent on drinking in the middle of the day.

"...You two, eh?"

"I'm the poison tester, so I have to taste everything first."

"Don't you have the 'Analyze' skill? Just looking at my cup should be plenty."

"Not a chance, Captain!"

These two were as entertaining as ever.

"Very well. We can't well drink all those casks with just the three of us here anyway. You two can join us if you'll stop the comedy act."

At that, the captain and the foxfolk officer looked so happy, they almost flung their plates in the air.

I guess General Erthal was friendlier than he looked.

"This must be Zetts County red wine and this Eluette Marquisate fruit wine. But what is this clear liquor here?"

"I don't know, either. It's a gift from Sir Pendragon."

Both of the men turned to look at me.

"It's rum from the Lalagi Kingdom called Paradise and liqueur from the Ishrallie Kingdom called Calm Seas. Both have a light sweetness and are easy to drink—"

"Paradise from Lalagi, you say?"

General Erthal jumped up in surprise, then picked up the bottle of Paradise rum.

Somehow, it vividly reminded me of events that happened in the Kingdom of Sorcery Lalagi.

“But it is said that this liquor never leaves the Lalagi Kingdom.”

I could understand why people would think that.

The Kingdom of Sorcery was practically a gathering of alcohol-loving nobles, so they probably refused to export good liquor.

“The Ishrallie Kingdom is famous for the Heaven’s Teardrop gems, but I’ve never seen this liquor before. And this red wine is in a different bottle—is it not also from Zetts County?”

“No, that’s called ‘fairy wine’...”

“What?! The drink of the elves that the guildmaster is always bragging about?!”

Guildmaster? The head of the explorers’ guild, perhaps? Fairy wine must not be as rare in Labyrinth City as it is in Lalagi.

When Viscount Siemmen looked envious, I whispered to him that I would send him some of the same later.

“Now then, a toast to our friendship, Sir Pendragon and Viscount Siemmen!”

General Erthal’s toast launched something of a drinking party.

The captain and the foxfolk officer joined in, too, of course.

“Okay, no poison in this one.”

“You didn’t really need to drink it to figure that out, did you?”

“That’s not true, Captain. Even ‘Analyze’ isn’t perfect, you know.”

The foxfolk man was right: If you used a recognition-inhibiting item higher than the observer’s “Analyze” skill, the latter wouldn’t work.

“It’s even mentioned in the tales of the great ancestral king. When King Sharik the Second took over the throne and the ancestral king traveled the world, there was word of a mysterious skill that even the original Yamato stone couldn’t identify.”

“That’s just made-up nonsense that some writer added on later.”

The captain smacked the foxfolk officer on the head. Talk about workplace harassment.

However, the foxfolk man just kept talking. What a tough guy.

“What about the green greater hell demon that appears in history books, then? He fooled a Yamato stone and infiltrated the ancestral king’s army, then made an assassination attempt, didn’t he?”

“I’ve heard about that one. But the ancestral king saw through him, right?”

The phrase “green greater hell demon” made me think of the green-clad noble who said “indeed” a lot—Counselor Poputema—but my AR display said he was human.

If the ancestral king Yamato, who was a hero, could see through it, then surely my Menu and “Search Entire Map” couldn’t be fooled, since they picked up information even Arisa’s “Analyze” skill didn’t.

Unless Yamato figured it out using something other than the “Analyze” skill, of course.

I doubted that anyone, legendary king or no, would have such a convenient, omnipotent skill short of a manga or light novel protagonist.

“Hmm. I thought I’d tasted all the delicacies of this world, but this is truly delicious.”

General Erthal complimented the food I brought.

To go with the sweet wine, I’d made all sorts of canapés, three varieties of deep-fried *gyoza*, and of course pizza and fried orange chicken.

Not many people were eating the pizza, probably because it was unfamiliar to them, but the fried foods and canapés were rapidly disappearing.

“I’ve never seen such golden food.”

“It’s known as ‘fried *gyoza*.’ Try it with this sauce here, if you please.”

Viscount Siemmen was surprised by the fried *gyoza*, which had entered my cooking lineup in the old capital, so I offered him the *gyoza* sauce.

“I’ve never had anything this tasty! They don’t call this guy the ‘miracle chef’ for nothing. Hey, Captain, don’t hog all the fried goodness!”

“Quiet, you. Why don’t you stick to the moldy cheese or the toasted jerky?”

“That’s mean, Captain.”

Moldy?

“Hmph, that’s supposed to be moldy! Here I thought I’d be kind enough to offer the famous cheese of the Nolork Kingdom...”

“Might I try a little?”

“S-Sir Pendragon, I wouldn’t if I were you...”

Viscount Siemmen tried to warn me off, but it just looked like normal Camembert cheese to me.

The smell was the same, too, and as for the taste...

“...This is delicious. What an excellent cheese.”

“Indeed. Nobles from the Nolork Kingdom brought it, along with this one.”

His mood improving, General Erthal produced another cheese.

This one was just a normal kind.

“Mozzarella, is it? This is delicious, too.”

“‘Mosserella’? This one is from the Garleon Alliance. They only called it ‘white cheese,’ so I did not know it was called ‘mosserella.’”

At this rate, the name “mosserella” was going to stick. To hopefully avoid this, I quickly said I’d confused it with a similar cheese.

The mozzarella-like “white cheese” was sold elsewhere in the city, he informed me, so I got a simple letter of introduction with which I could buy first-rate white cheese.

The Camembert-like cheese was delivered only on the side, along with “Nolork thorn” shipments, and the general didn’t know when they would next get more.

I must have looked disappointed, because General Erthal offered to share half

of his with me. I would have to make some kind of Camembert-based dish for him as thanks, along with a portion of the other liquor I had in reserve.

“This wine is delicious.”

There’s nothing like the combination of good cheese and good wine.

General Erthal continued to offer me more of his treasured varieties of cheese, along with equally treasured wines.

“Duke Vistall’s red wine is the best in the Shiga Kingdom. Unlike Lessau County’s bland red wine, it has a luxurious scent and depth of flavor.”

Come on—you don’t need to diss another place’s wine like that.

I seemed to remember it being a delicious, full-bodied red wine in its own right.

Keeping my complaints to myself, I sampled a glass or two of Zetts County white wine and rosé. Both were great beginner wines, easy to drink, if not too memorable.

Thus, we wound up enjoying the liquor and snacks together until noon like old drinking buddies.

Viscount Siemmen enjoyed liquor, too, but he seemed to be a bit of a lightweight, crashing not long into the proceedings.

According to one of his vassals, this was nothing out of the ordinary for him, so it wouldn’t affect the evening’s banquet.



“What in the world is that?”

In the weed-filled field that was next to our new house, some colorful cabbages were growing.

...No. They were children’s heads.

It looked like something out of a horror movie at first, but they did indeed have bodies attached.

I didn’t think they were playing hide-and-seek among the weeds, so what exactly were those kids doing?

I thanked the vassal of Viscount Siemmen who'd brought me home by carriage, then entered the house.

"I'm back."

"Welcome home, master."

Arisa was the first to greet me.

According to my map, the beastfolk girls were cleaning the gutters, Lulu and Nana were sorting the pantry, and Mia was looking after the sick children.

"Do you have any idea what those kids outside are doing?"

"Ah, they heard about the food last night, so they're waiting around in hopes that there might be work today, too."

So it was something like the bag-carrier kids who waited by the labyrinth entrance, then.

"They haven't come asking for work themselves?"

"They did, but Liza said us slaves couldn't hire them of our own accord or we'd inconvenience our master."

Oh right. I'd pretty much forgotten about it lately, but the girls aside from Nana and Mia were technically still my slaves.

Lulu and Arisa were bound by Geis, so I couldn't free them, but I would gladly free the beastfolk girls from slavery anytime if they wished it.

"I see. In that case..."

I decided to hire the kids for jobs like weeding the empty plots of land, disposing of garbage, cleaning the ditches along the road, checking the ditches' covers, and so on.

Just as I'd made up my mind, Nana came rushing over to me, looking strangely excited.

Of course, her face was still as expressionless as ever, but the way her hands were flailing about conveyed her feelings quite clearly.

"Master! The empty plot has become a field of larvae, I report!"

She must have seen the kids outside on her way back from the pantry.

I took Arisa and Nana with me to hire the kids for the aforementioned jobs.

“...First, please cut the weeds on the empty plots, then dispose of the garbage. I’ll hire all of you, so make sure you work hard and listen to instructions from Nana and Arisa here.”

““““Yes, sir!”””” the kids chorused.

Like the day before, I was paying them only with food and a copper coin each, but that was enough to send up a chorus of cheers from the children.

I left Nana in charge of supervising them, then went to go help Tama and Pochi.

Mia was to stay in touch with Lulu and keep watching the sick kids.

I asked Lulu to prepare both the children’s food and the pastries I would bring to the banquet tonight.

Then I took Liza and Arisa with me to greet our new neighbors.

“Goodness! You bought that cursed mansion? You’ve been fooled, my boy. If you know any nobles or government officials, you’d better go to the viceroy’s office and complain. You three can stay here for the night if you have nowhere else to go.”

The owner of the first house we stopped at gravely tried to convince us not to move in.

He explained that from the time of the incident to around ten years ago, people had constantly been tricked into moving into the place, only to meet unnatural deaths or to flee under formidable curses.

Ten years ago was when the explorers’ guild bought the whole place up, putting a stop to such occurrences.

“I pass by that place from time to time, and it always leaves me feeling sick. Lots of little birds and bugs die just by getting too close, you know!”

The man’s wife was quick to warn us, too.

“I appreciate your concern, truly. But I had a highly respected saint dispel the

curse, so it's all right now."

"But no one's ever been able to—"

"Besides, we spent the night in the mansion last night safely, and not one of the kids we hired for odd jobs has gotten sick."

"...Really?"

Thanks to my "Negotiation" and "Fabrication" skills firing on all cylinders, I was able to reassure the neighbor and his wife.

I did have the Saint title, so technically it wasn't a lie.

After sealing the deal by giving them a basket of assorted honey pastries, I moved on to the next house.

After that, we went to quite a few more houses. All of them either reacted the same way as the first place or shut the door as soon as I said where I had moved in.

At least most of them fell in the former category.

Before heading to the ranches, I went around to the local farms and bought some fresh produce. In one case, I even got talked into signing up for a regular delivery.

We'd be away from the mansion more often than not, but I paid for several months in advance, and I requested that they leave the produce by the front door, so it shouldn't be a problem.

Besides, if I hired the person Viscount Siemmen was going to introduce me to, that would all be taken care of.

"Th-the mansion behind us...?"

When I visited the ranch behind the estate and told them I'd moved in, the farmer and his wife looked horrified, but their attitude softened once I gave them the same explanation that had worked for the first family I encountered.

"A recurring order?"

"If possible. Once a month is fine for cheese, sausage, and other preserved goods, but I'd love to get milk and eggs delivered every morning."

I made this request because they said they offered deliveries, but they looked at me like I had several extra heads.

They seemed to have a pretty good amount of chickens, so I assumed they'd be willing to sell me enough eggs for making pastries and such, but maybe they had a contract somewhere else or something?

"T-truly...?"

The farmer's words jogged my memory.

I'd been told that since this ranch just happened to be behind the "cursed mansion," they had difficulty selling their produce for good prices.

"Yes, if you don't have any other contracts. Would that be all right?"

"Contracts? Heavens, no! That would be wonderful!"

"All right, then."

It was strangely cheap, so I made an offer that was only slightly lower than the market prices of the other ranches. I love a good bargain, but too cheap and I would have felt like I was taking advantage of them.

In addition, they didn't have any contract cancelation policies or anything like that, but I added a clause that if I were to end the contract, I would pay three months' worth as a fine.

I also paid that same amount in advance as a deposit.

When I first arrived, I'd noticed that their equipment seemed to be considerably worn out, so I figured they could use that money as working capital.

They must have been thrilled, because they sent me home with more dairy and meat products than I could carry and even came down to the road to see me off.

As a bonus, I also hired them to take care of the runosaurs and horses when we were away from the mansion.

It was always good to be friendly with the neighbors, especially if they owned a ranch.



“My name is Miteruna. Ignorant as I may be, I will work my very hardest under your employ. Thank you for your consideration.”

“Of course. Nice to meet you.”

The woman I met at Viscount Siemmen’s place was very polite indeed.

Her cool expression and rigid posture showed clearly how serious and dedicated she was.

Miss Miteruna was a human, twenty-six years of age, and fairly attractive with a slender frame. She was around my height, with long reddish-brown hair in a braid. Below her thin eyebrows were rust-colored eyes.

She had been married, but her husband had passed on, so she had moved back in with her family and devoted herself to work.

Though she’d called herself “ignorant,” she was just being modest; in fact, she had graduated from the royal academy in the royal capital.

She was level 9, with skills like “Etiquette,” “Service,” “Negotiation,” and “Education.”

“She was working as another family’s maid until recently, but the head of that household was a bit...difficult.”

Viscount Siemmen was being vague, but I eventually learned that she’d been fired after rejecting the master, who had been sexually harassing her.

“Since that barone—I mean, that *family* relieved her of her duties, she’s been working as my maid. However, she’s far too talented to be wasted on such a position, which is why I thought to introduce her to you.”

The viscount nearly let slip that the harassing bastard was a baronet but corrected himself.

There were several baronets in Labyrinth City, but the only two with mansions in the nobles’ quarters were Mr. Jelil of Red Dragon’s Roar and a man called Dyukeli.

Baronet Dyukeli— Ah, that was the name of the man to whom the innkeeper tried to sell my carriage.

That didn't necessarily mean that one of those two was the pervert, but I would have to keep the girls away from them, just in case. I didn't know them well enough to trust them completely.

It was decided that Miss Miteruna would come to work at my mansion starting the following morning.

If possible, I wanted to hire two or three maids or butlers to work under her, but it was difficult to find anyone willing due to the reputation of the cursed mansion.

I could probably give it another try once that rumor was dispersed.

"No wonder they call him the miracle chef."

"Yes, I've never had such delicious pastries."

After my meeting with Miss Miteruna, dinner began, and I got to enjoy some old-capital-style food for the first time in a while.

The *castellas* I offered for the after-dinner tea party seemed to be quite a hit with the ladies in attendance.

Trying to reproduce the texture of granulated sugar, Lulu and I had experimented with the sugars we'd acquired in Lalagi, until finally we were able to accomplish it by breaking down some rock candy.

As a symbol of friendship, I gave the women the same light stone accessories and pastry assortments that had been so popular in the old capital.

"I thought that rum was only a drink for lowly sailors, but this is on another level."

"It's a little too strong for me. I like this orchid mead."

"Isn't that the stuff that's made with monster materials?"

"Yes, but it's been completely purified. It's not a problem anymore."

I wasn't sure whether to bring out the orchid mead, but Viscount Siemmen gave it the okay, so I went ahead and brought some out.

Luckily, most of the attendees had sophisticated taste.

For the men's gifts, I chose white penholders I'd made from narwhal horns

and a sampling of Lalagi rums.

Considering the nature of the orchid mead, I brought only enough to drink at the party.

“Hmm, so you clashed with Sokell, eh?”

Once I’d gotten friendly with the nobles Viscount Siemmen introduced me to, I decided to ask them for the latest scoop about the aristocrats of Labyrinth City.

“He’s from a royal capital family, but he couldn’t get a decent governmental position there, so he crept into Labyrinth City on Counselor Poputema’s request.”

“Though at the time, all he had going for him was that he was *the viceroy’s lover*.”

Since they were speaking so frankly about it, maybe same-sex relationships weren’t unusual in the Shiga Kingdom?

I didn’t lean that way myself, but I wouldn’t discriminate against someone for it, either. Love is love, after all.

“...But when he offered a medicine that worked on the viceroy’s daughter’s illness, the viceroy’s wife took a liking to him, too. That’s why he’s even trusted as the acting viceroy now.”

“Under Counselor Poputema’s supervision, of course.”

Ah, so that’s why Sokell didn’t seem to like Poputema.

From the way that was worded, though, I got the impression that the viceroy’s wife had more pull than the viceroy himself.

I thought that was unusual, since the Shiga Kingdom tended to have chauvinistic leanings. I asked more about it and learned that the viceroy’s wife was the heir to the house of Ashinen, while the viceroy had only inherited the marquisate by marriage, so the wife had more political power.

“In Labyrinth City, the only people who might be able to speak on equal footing with the viceroy’s wife are the leader of the explorers’ guild and General Erthal.”

So there were ways of dealing with the viceroy and his wife if necessary. That was good to know.

I hadn't met the guildmaster, so if anything happened, I'd have to speak with General Erthal.

Judging by his behavior earlier today, a copy of the Magic Sword Akatsuki would probably be more than enough to earn any favor I needed.

"But with the viceroy's level of power, would he not be able to acquire any medicine he needs for his daughter?"

Because a doubt was still nagging at me, I asked someone who seemed to be in the know.

"Any ordinary alchemist can transmute that drug—ogredrink potion—but the only way to get the ingredients is to send a party of garnet badges deep into the labyrinth."

"Not only that, but the ogredrink potion is only a suppressant, not a cure. And neither the potion nor its ingredients keeps for long, so it's necessary to continue doing those expeditions on a regular basis."

So no amount of money would be enough, then.

"There is a cure that can be made with the powder of the bloodstone that can occasionally be found in the Blood-Sucking Labyrinth of the Saga Empire, but the imperial family of the Saga Empire has a monopoly on it. And bloodstone powder can only suppress the symptoms like the ogredrink potion."

In short, it was very valuable medicine.

If Sokell was supplying them with this ogredrink stuff, I could see why they would value even such an ill-mannered man.

"If I only knew his source, I could get in the viceroy's good graces, too..." a corpulent baron muttered enviously.

"I doubt it. I looked into it when he first brought in those potions, but all I could figure out was that he has an alchemist protégé make it in his house."

"There's even a rumor that Sokell is the one who makes the demonic potions in Labyrinth City, although that might just be out of jealousy."

“I’d say that’s inevitable, since ogredrink potions, corpse potions, and demonic potions are all made with similar main ingredients.”

“True. If Sokell’s alchemist is as skilled as they say, he could make corpse and demonic potions just as easily as ogredrink potions.”

Come to think of it, I’d seen some explorers with the Demonic Potion: Addicted status, too.

No one would admit to carrying an illegal drug, I was sure, but finding out was simple for me.

Using my map search, I quickly discovered that there really was a stock of demonic potion in Sokell’s basement.

Forget morally gray—this guy was deep in the black.

The only problem was figuring out how to reveal that information without giving away my unique skill.

I had a few moves that might make people believe me, but none of them was necessarily cards that I wanted to play.

While I was thinking about that, I opened the marker section to put a marker on Sokell—and I noticed that one of the trade ships of the Dragonpen Trading Company, the group I’d invested in, was well on its way to the trade city Tartumina.

That was sooner than the travel plans they’d shown me. The trip must be going well, then.

Oh right. Back to marking.

I put one on the noble in green, too, just to be safe.

“Even if Sokell couldn’t do it alone, Baronet Dyukeli might be able to help him, since he’s got medicinal and alchemy guilds under his thumb...”

“In that case, couldn’t Counselor Poputema be part of it, too? I hear he’s well-connected in the underworld.”

“Sokell’s one thing, but I wouldn’t stir up trouble with the likes of Dyukeli and Poputema if I were you.”

“It’s true. Counselor Poputema controls Marquis Ashinen from the shadows. He plays at being an eccentric now, but not long ago he was as feared as a poisonous serpent. Who knows whether he’s really retired, too?”

“And Dyukeli might not have high status, but he’s the viceroy’s right-hand man. Plus, since he has control over the sale of magic potions and tools in Labyrinth City, his influence is nothing to sneeze at.”

I see. This didn’t sound like a situation I wanted to get involved in.

If the time came, I could just become Nanashi the Hero and bring in the Shigan king.

I did save his body double during the yellow-skinned-demon incident in the old capital, so surely he wouldn’t mind helping me out a little.

“The explorers’ guild probably could make demonic potions, too, since they’ve got an alchemist from the royal capital, but that’s unthinkable as long as the current guildmaster’s in charge.”

“Yeah, that old woman hates demonic potions.”

Huh. I didn’t know this guildmaster, but if she was against harmful drugs, then I already liked her.

“Sir Pendragon, you ought to avoid Sokell, too, and try to curry favor with the viceroy and his wife instead.”

“The viceroy’s wife loves jewels and rare, delicious sweets, so once she hears about the pastries and accessories you brought today, I’m certain she’ll invite you over for tea,” one of the noble’s wives informed me.

These two were friends of Viscount Siemmen’s from a royal capital family, not the old capital like many of the nobles here.

“The viceroy enjoys sculptures from the Flue Empire era, especially those of muscular men.”

“If you like, Sir Pendragon, I can introduce you to an art dealer from the royal capital.”

“Thank you very much. If I can’t procure anything through the friend I normally trade with, I’ll be sure to take you up on that offer.”

In truth, I had plenty of that kind of thing among the salvaged goods from the sunken ships in the Seadragon Islands, so I could probably just pick something from there.

“The viceroy and his wife are doting parents. I’m sure anything their children would like would make them happy, too.”

“Sir Pendragon, you’re not terribly far in age from their third son, Gerits. I’ve heard he wants to become an explorer, so that might be your best bet for getting close to the family.”

“If you can deal with that selfish boy’s whims, that is.”

A young noble grinned wryly and smacked my shoulder encouragingly.

Yeah, putting up with a self-absorbed noble brat doesn’t sound like my cup of tea. I’ll probably pass on that one.

At any rate, I accumulated all kinds of information as I bonded with the nobles.

The gathering came to an end around the time that Viscount Siemmen drank himself to sleep, so I saw off my new noble friends before leaving the viscount’s mansion.

I was offered a ride home in the viscount’s carriage, but I wanted to straighten out some information in my mind. Instead, I decided to walk home in the cool night air.

First of all, Sokell was the viceroy’s lover, and since he had provided them with ogredrink potion for their fourth daughter’s illness, the viceroy’s wife favored him as well. He was also almost certainly the source of the supply of demonic potion in the city.

Counselor Poputema—the noble in green—and Baronet Dyukeli were bad news. The former seemed to be particularly dangerous, so I’d have to take care not to get involved with him.

The viceroy and his wife adored their children, and the wife was more powerful than the viceroy.

According to Princess Meetia, the couple had returned to Labyrinth City, so

they had probably received the letter from their second son, Rayleigh, by now.

If they read that letter, I got the feeling things would be resolved without me having to do much of anything.

Princess Meetia's face drifted through my mind.

We have come to cure the viceroy's daughter of her ailment.

That was what she had said when she first arrived in the city.

With her Breath of Purification, the ogredrink potion might not even be necessary.

Thinking about it that way, I couldn't help but suspect that Sokell might have been behind the attack on Princess Meetia yesterday afternoon.

I didn't have any evidence yet, though. It was merely a suspicion for now.

Oh right.

I didn't want anything to happen to an acquaintance of mine, so I put a marker on Princess Meetia, too, just in case.



"Hmm. I'm still being followed, eh?"

On my way home, I sensed that I was being watched. I stopped at a few bars in an effort to shake off the tail, but they seemed to have no intention of giving up.

I was able to narrow down the suspects somewhat with my map search.

Most likely, the culprit was working for either Sokell or the noble in green.

In fact, there seemed to be two people tailing me who weren't working together at all.

As I was thinking about this at the counter of another bar, I overheard some drunks gossiping.

This place was in a shopping district fairly far away from the center of the city, so you could hear all kinds of interesting things.

"You got paid? Buy me a drink, then."

“Shut up—all I got was a producer price for magic potions. All thanks to that cheapskate Dyukeli!”

“Yeah, he’s got all them alchemy guilds and the like under his thumb. Can’t get nothin’ for nothin’.”

“Wish the guilds would try a little harder.”

Most of what I heard about Baronet Dyukeli from the explorers was a lot of complaints.

The only non-complaint was that his eldest daughter, Mary-Ann, was a beautiful girl who often dressed like a man and wore a longsword to go sightseeing near the labyrinth.

I guess they talked about Sokell, too.

“I heard the viceroy’s lover tried to put the moves on that ‘thee-thou’ princess and got totally rejected.”

“Yeah. She’s a princess from some small place, right? But she’s friendly even to folks like us, so I think she’s a good kid.”

The “thee-thou” princess was probably Meetia, right?

“I heard from my bro who works for the government that he proposed to her and got rejected.”

“For real?!”

“Yeah. First a married man, now he’s proposing to a child... Did a woman mess this guy up, too?”

“What do you mean, ‘too’?”

The conversation then shifted to romantic advice among the explorer friends, but I was surprised to learn that Sokell had proposed to Princess Meetia.

And for some reason, I even heard some rumors about myself...

“Did you hear about that noble who got mixed up in the chain rampage?”

“Yeah, the kid who travels with a bunch of girls, right?”

“I heard the guildmaster arguing with some angry lady about it. Since they all

survived that rampage safely and brought back garnet-level numbers of cores, they think there might've been foul play involved."

"It is crazy that no one was hurt. What kinda foul play, though?"

"Yeah, if there's foul play that can keep you from being injured, I wanna do it, too."

"The angry lady was sure he must've used tons of demonic potions while hunting."

"Yeah, right. Demonic potions only strengthen you and stop you from feelin' pain, plus they make it easier to level up. They don't let you fight without gettin' hurt."

"Are you talking about that young noble? Let me join in!"

Another explorer pushed his way into the conversation, beer stein in hand.

"...Yep, goblin beer is still gross."

"Don't ask to join and then change the subject!"

The rest of the group groaned as the carefree explorer chugged his beer.

"Right, right. What was I saying? Oh yeah... What's his name, Penpen? I heard he's the lover of some big shot in the old capital."

Don't go spreading baseless rumors about me.

I wanted to sock him in the face, but that would probably be a bad move. The last thing I needed was for him to start spreading even worse rumors out of spite.

Instead, I stood up and strolled over to the relaxed explorer with a smile.

"That's a misunderstanding. I just happen to be friends with the viscount's younger brother."

"S-Sir Penpen!"

That name makes me sound like a penguin.

I didn't know where we'd met, but apparently this guy knew my face somehow.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Satou Pendragon, a hereditary knight and new explorer. Since you’re all more experienced than I am, I hope you’ll share some of your wisdom.”

I smiled and bowed courteously as the bar fell silent.

The explorers were all staring at me, aghast, so I motioned to the barkeep.

“Excuse me, barkeep! To celebrate our new friendship, I’ll pay for everyone’s drinks tonight. Let’s have another round for my fellow explorers, and let them drink till morning!”

Since I was already standing out, I decided to treat everyone to drinks. At a cheap bar like this, it shouldn’t cost more than ten gold coins or so.

It was essentially a calculated publicity stunt, but now I could ensure I didn’t have any enemies and hopefully even get some positive rumors started about me.

“Sir Knight?”

As the bar erupted into cheers, the waitress addressed me inquiringly.

I hadn’t noticed because of the suggestive barmaid outfit she was wearing, but she was a friend of mine.

“Good to see you again, Miss Ayaume. Is Mr. Kajiro well?”

It was Ayaume, the female samurai who’d trained my vanguard group in the old capital along with the samurai Kajiro of the Saga Empire.

Considering that she participated in the martial arts tournament in the old capital, what was she doing waitressing in a bar? If she was short on money, she should be able to earn some in the labyrinth easily.

“I’m afraid Lord Kajiro injured his leg... I’ve been temporarily going into the labyrinth with an all-women party called Silverlight and working here at the bar on my days off.”

She explained that the money she earned exploring the labyrinth went to paying off Mr. Kajiro’s medical bills, so they were covering their cost of living with her earnings as a barmaid and money from Kajiro’s side jobs.

“Ayaume! I’ll pay ye a silver coin if ye’ll give me some private services!”

“Get out of here, you bum! And don’t come back!”

Ayaume shouted at the drunkard with uncharacteristic harshness.

Clearly, the virtuous samurai refused to take part in the prostitution that often accompanied a barmaid’s job in the Shiga Kingdom.

Incidentally, Kajiro’s side job was making paper parasols.

It was so fitting that I could easily picture it, but I didn’t want to comment given the circumstances.

Oh, I know!

“Actually, I’ve just bought a house in Labyrinth City. If you like, perhaps I could hire you two as security? It can just be until Mr. Kajiro is able to practice martial arts again, if you wish...”

“R-really?! Yes, of course, we’d love to!”

Excited at my proposal, Ayaume zoomed so close to me, I thought she was going to kiss me, grasping my hands as she agreed.

If I hired these two as live-in security, the mansion would definitely be safe while we were away.

Depending on the condition of Kajiro’s leg, it could probably be cured with a lesser elixir, unless he’d lost it or part of it. And if he had, I could probably make him a prosthetic leg so he could return to his practice.

I thought about the sprinters at the Paralympics. If I could make him something like that, maybe in time, he could return to the martial arts he loved.

In the meantime, he could probably teach self-defense to the kids who came to the house requesting work.

“I don’t suppose we could start tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course. You’re always welcome.”

The drunkards around us raised a fuss when I told her where I was living, but Ayaume simply said, “Exorcising evil is part of a samurai’s job,” a statement that would probably get her in trouble if any Japanese samurai were to hear it.

Once I'd finished chatting with Ayaume, I left out the back of the bar to return home.

""""Pendragon.""""

I thought I'd shaken the people tailing me, but when I stepped into a back alley, I found three thugs waiting for me with unsheathed swords.

I'd seen them approaching on my radar, but there were some ladies of the night between them and me, so I decided to change my route to avoid getting them involved.

""""Found you.""""

The hoodlums came charging at me recklessly.

It would be simple enough to beat them, but there was a bit of a problem.

Part of it was that the three thugs were actually young nobles of the viceroy's faction, but even more suspicious was the fact that Sokell was leading a band of guards this way.

Between all this and the people trailing me earlier, someone was definitely trying to catch me in a trap.

""""Die!""""

Their swords moved faster than I expected.

However, there was no skill behind their swings, and their swords crashed into the ground or nearby walls.

They were just normal iron swords, too, so they wound up getting chipped and bent in the process.

But the three attackers didn't seem to notice.

"May I ask why you're attacking me?"

""""Die!""""

They spoke in stiff, robotic tones as they swung their swords at me.

That was to be expected, though.

"So this is the effect of corpse potions?"

They had all taken a dangerous illegal drug.

It blocked all feelings of pain and enhanced the user's strength beyond their limits.

Unlike any body strengthening skills or spells, it completely overrode their bodies' physical limits, so when the effect wore off, they would experience intensely painful recoil.

According to some old documents from the old capital, the drug was developed by the crazed king Gartapht during the demi-human wars four hundred years ago.

It was said they forcibly administered it to prisoners of war, stealing their free will and forcing them to fight on the front lines as corpse soldiers.

“““Die!”””

Dodging several attacks at once, I opened my map and finally found the kind of person I was looking for.

Happily enough, he was even with another person of interest.

“So long, would-be assassins.”

I used the “Taunt” skill on my words as I fled, running slowly enough that the three men could keep up with me.

Opening my map, I picked an alley without any prostitutes or drunkards around.

Along the way, I saw an old man chasing off some young drifters fishing through garbage and some other kids slumped in the corners of alleys.

I was a little worried about them, but I couldn't get them involved in this situation, so I kept running without calling out to them.

Finally, I arrived right where I wanted to be.

“Hey, watch it!”

“Good evening, Captain.”

“Hmm? It's Sir Pendragon.”

Strolling through the business district were the labyrinth army captain, the foxfolk officer, and one other soldier with his face hidden.

The three of them were wearing dark cloaks over their uniforms, suggesting that they were on their way to enjoy some nighttime entertainment.

“““D-die!”””

The three men chasing me closed in to attack, out of breath.

“Oh dear, that won’t do.”

“Hmph, what kind of fools swing their swords around in the middle of the street?!”

The captain and the foxfolk officer knocked two of them out easily.

The remaining one ran at me with his sword raised, but a flash of red light from beside me blocked the attack.

“Did you piss off some noble brats or something?”

The wielder of the “Spellblade”-clad mithril sword was the third member of the incognito trio: General Erthal.

The final attacker was flung backward by the parry, and the captain knocked him to the ground with a brain-buster-like move.

It was rare to see someone so skilled at hand-to-hand combat in a world where monsters were the biggest enemy.

“Far from it. I don’t even know who these people are,” I answered.

General Erthal stroked his beard, deep in thought.

Just then, the sound of countless hooves and footsteps echoed from the direction of the alley I’d come from.

“There they are! Capture those bastards who attacked young nobles!”

At Sokell’s shout, the guards readied their short spears, breathing heavily.

“Just a moment, guards! These men on the ground are the only attackers here!” the captain roared.

“What?! I recognize these young men. They’re from distinguished noble

families!” Sokell shouted exaggeratedly, like a bad actor. “You’re the ones wearing black, with your swords out in the street, harming these young men. You must be the attackers!”

“Is that right?”

Underneath the shadows of his hood, General Erthal grinned savagely.

One of the soldiers noticed the red light on the general’s blade and tried to call out to Sokell.

“L-Lord Sokell!”

“Silence! If you must speak to me, do it later!”

At this brusque response, the soldier retreated, bringing a few others with him.

They must have noticed that it was General Erthal they were dealing with.

Standing behind Sokell, they took poses that suggested *we don’t want to fight*.

“Come now, guards! Don’t hold back—capture them! If they resist, cut them down!”

The oblivious Sokell kept shouting orders, but none of the guards responded.

“Hmmm? This is strange, Captain.”

“What is it?”

The foxfolk officer smirked unpleasantly, addressing his captain loudly with convenient timing. “These attackers seem to be under the influence of corpse potions.”

“Corpse potions?! The forbidden drug that forcibly controls people like slaves?!”

The captain’s thunderous bellow echoed through the streets.

The brothels shut their windows and faces peered out from the bars.

The foxfolk officer was doing this on purpose, but the captain seemed to be genuinely angry.

“Wh-what?!” Obviously shaken, Sokell responded instinctively. “You accuse my friends of having used corpse potions?!”

Uh-oh. Way to dig your own grave.

In his panic, Sokell had just acknowledged that the attackers were his friends.

“Oh-ho? So these scoundrels who drank corpse potions are friends of yours, Acting Viceroy Sokell?”

At the foxfolk man’s deliberately loud declaration, the nearby drunkards started murmuring Sokell’s name.

“How dare you make such a baseless accusation to these well-known nobles!”

At this point, it seemed like Sokell was in too deep to back out.

I noticed that he wasn’t calling them his friends anymore.

“It’s not baseless. He may seem a fool, but Kinkuri is actually our army’s deputy analyst, since he has the ‘Analyze’ skill.”

At the word *analyst*, Sokell turned deathly pale.

“Don’t call me a fool, Captain,” the foxfolk officer complained, and he got another bop on the head for his troubles.

“Fine, then! I’ll use my authority as acting viceroy to arrest you! Drop your weapons!”

Getting desperate, Sokell started shouting near-incoherently.

It was entertaining to see him act like the bumbling minor villain he was.

If this were a game, he’d be the kind of mini boss who you beat early on.

“You think you have the right to arrest us, eh?”

“Silence, fool! You’re all criminals!” Sokell shrieked at the general. “Guards! Seize them!”

Sokell sprayed spit along with his orders, but the guards still didn’t move to obey. Instead, they looked at one another, as if trying to silently decide which of them should tell Sokell who he was dealing with.

“What are you doing?! Useless men! Who do you think is paying your

salary?!”

The men simply looked away, their faces unreadable.

They were probably all thinking, *Well, it certainly isn't you.*

“Enough foolishness, brat.”

General Erthal lowered his hood and stepped forward.

“B-brat, you say?! Who do you think—?”

Sokell's shout faded away mid-sentence.

He had finally recognized the general's face.

“So you're the scum who's been borrowing the viceroy's power.”

“S-scum...? General or not, I'll have you rescind those words at once!”

General Erthal snorted at Sokell's bluff.

“The labyrinth army will take care of these scoundrels until the judicial police from the royal capital arrive.”

“Preposterous! Apprehending criminals is the viceroy's duty! The army has no such authority!”

The general glared at Sokell, who was yapping like a tiny dog.

“Have you forgotten? You stated yourself that this would be a conflict of interest.”

“Right, since the guys who attacked us were friends of Lord Sokell's and all...”

The foxfolk officer, Kinkuri, seemed to be enjoying this immensely.

“Besides, these criminals raised their swords against General Erthal, a commanding officer of the labyrinth army. Noble families or no, they won't get off without a punishment.”

The captain's words seemed to finally get through to Sokell, who let out a little growl.

The three of them were backing Sokell into a corner, and it looked like his mental hit points were running out.

Just as the foxfolk officer opened his mouth to torment the man further, a new figure arrived on the scene.

“That’s quite enough, indeed.”

I couldn’t see him past the crowd of people, but judging by that peculiar sentence ending, the noble in green, Counselor Poputema, had arrived.

“Hmph, so you’re behind this?”

“Whatever do you mean? I was just out for a stroll when I heard a commotion, indeed.”

“Lord Poputema! Pendragon there is the culprit who assaulted General Erthal and unjustly injured these young nobles!”

Oh dear. Now Sokell was coming after me.

“Is that right? But Sir Pendragon is unarmed, indeed.”

Poputema smiled at Sokell like a devil.

It almost seemed as if he, too, was enjoying having Sokell cornered.

“But a demon slayer like Pendragon could surely defeat three youths unarmed.”

True, I could have taken three or three thousand of those guys, but still.

More importantly, thanks to Sokell’s unnecessary jabbering, now the onlookers were starting to murmur things like “Pendragon the Demon Slayer”...



I guess I didn't mind being a little famous among ordinary people, but still.

"Well, Sir Pendragon, you have heard Sir Sokell's accusation, indeed. Did you injure these men, indeed?"

"I did not. In fact, I did not lay a finger on them."

"What he says is true. This I swear on the name of the ancestral king Yamato and on the Erthal family name. Though perhaps I should share on the family name of Duke Vistall as well?"

"That will not be necessary, indeed."

General Erthal's testimony seemed to have cleared my name.

"Sir Sokell, go home and calm yourself awhile, indeed. Guards, carry these unconscious ruffians to the jail at the viceroy's offices, indeed."

"...That won't do." The noble in green tried to take advantage of the confusion and make off with the men, but General Erthal stopped him. "I can't have you disposing of the evidence."

"How preposterous, indeed. I intend to investigate the source of the corpse potions." The noble in green shook his head.

"You swear on your family name?"

"On the name of the ancestral king Yamato and the house of Duke Poputema, indeed."

"Very well."

General Erthal nodded.

I guess corpse potions were just that dangerous of a drug.

"Corpse potions are quite troublesome, indeed. I wonder if the remnants of the Cannibal Snakes group have resurfaced, indeed."

Despite the grave nature of his words, the noble in green was smiling, as if he'd gotten his expressions mixed up.

"Time to drink this off! Let's go, Sir Pendragon."

General Erthal put his arm around my shoulder and led me away.

The drinking declaration was probably just to appease the noble in green. In reality, he seemed to be trying to get me away from any more potential trouble.

While we were at it, I decided to ask him a question.

“Is this Cannibal Snakes group very well-known?”

“They’re a criminal organization that brought drugs like demonic and corpse potions into Labyrinth City long ago,” the general responded.

I searched the map, but I didn’t see any organization by that name anywhere in the kingdom, including Labyrinth City Celivera.

“They tend to reemerge whenever the season of the demon lord draws near,” the general muttered seriously.

“Bringing down criminals who’ve used demonic potions is troublesome enough, but now there are corpse potions, too? Truly, it’s as if the city of Celivera is *cursed*.” The captain groaned.

“It makes sense, since you can get the ingredients in the labyrinth...”

The foxfolk officer got another punch for pointing out the unnecessary.

It was entirely possible that we’d be drinking through the night, so I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to let Arisa and the others know.

Still, though...

It was obvious that Sokell was trying to catch me in a kind of trap, but why would he go so far as to use some strange drug to make those men attack me?

Given his nature, it was possible that he attacked me to get revenge on Prince Sharorik’s behalf or even that he simply didn’t like me, but this seemed like a lot of effort just for that.

In the back of my mind, I remembered Princess Meetia saying that she was attacked by some well-dressed young hoodlums in masks.

If that was Sokell’s doing as well, then what was his goal?

Next, I remembered other facts like that Sokell used ogredrink potion to get close to the viceroy and his wife and that Princess Meetia’s Breath of Purification could have a similar effect, but I wasn’t sure what the connection

was.

Nope, I have no idea.

I'd never been good at solving mysteries like these.

At any rate, I might have to come up with some kind of plan to keep myself safe.

"Oh-ho... So you're treating us, Sir Pendragon? Even if I order some expensive sake?"

"Of course—go ahead. Order whatever you'd like."

I smiled at the shameless foxfolk officer.

For now, although this wasn't just to deal with Sokell, it would probably be best to start by getting closer with these three, since they rescued me from that predicament.

The four of us drank until dawn, resulting in me learning all kinds of labyrinth army information.

The foxfolk man kept ordering expensive drinks, but it meant that I learned about some quality brews, so that was fine with me.

New Proof

Satou here. I've heard that in the Showa era, businessmen devoted their whole lives to their company in hopes of getting promoted. In the Heisei era, however, it seems they prefer to prioritize their own lives over promotions.

"I'll be back in a month or so. If you have any problems, just talk to General Erthal or any of the nobles I introduced you to last night."

"Thank you very much. Travel safely."

The next morning, I left the still-drunken labyrinth army trio at the bar and went to the airship landing area at the labyrinth army base to see off Viscount Siemmen.

After my new employee Miss Miteruna and I watched his airship vanish into the eastern sky, she drove us back to the mansion by carriage.

"Who are those children, young master?"

"Ah, I hired them to clean up the empty plots of land."

It was still early in the morning, but the kids were already hard at work on our land, which had less weeds than before.

Looking at them reminded me of the homeless kids I'd seen in an alley last night while I was playing chase.

Maybe it was none of my business, but I at least wanted to make sure the people around me were happy.

(Mostly so that I could enjoy my carefree sightseeing journey, but still.) "Miss Miteruna, are there any orphanages in this city?"

"Please just call me Miteruna, young master. If you speak to your servants so politely, there are some who would think less of you or even try to take advantage."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll just call you Miteruna, then."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to be called "young master," either, but she said that was the standard for servants.

“As far as orphanages go...”

According to Miteruna, Labyrinth City had one orphanage at the explorers’ guild and one for each major temple, for a total of eight.

However, as I’d seen the day before, the temple-affiliated orphanages took in only “good-looking” children, and the explorers’ guild orphanage took in only orphaned children of garnet explorers.

“There used to be a royal orphanage as well, but the director was found to be embezzling the kingdom-provided funds, so he was executed and the orphanage destroyed.”

Miteruna added that she had a friend who’d worked at that orphanage.

According to this friend, the embezzlement itself was a false charge, brought about because the director refused to pay a bribe demanded by a government official.

Of course, this official had already been dealt with by the noble in green, aka Counselor Poputema.

“So it should be possible to rebuild the orphanage, then.”

“...Yes.”

Miteruna hesitation before agreeing prompted me to asked her why.

“Well, the current viceroy does not seem to be too interested in welfare-related issues...”

She said it would be all but impossible to revive the public orphanage unless the viceroy was replaced or a highly influential noble pushed for it.

“Not yet, then, I suppose...,” I murmured, gazing at the map.



“You were out all night, and now you bring a woman home with you?!”

“Guilty.”

As soon as we arrived back at the house, Arisa and Mia charged over, looking like they’d been up all night.

They must have stayed up waiting for me, even though I told them I might not

be back.

“This is the new head maid.”

“Huh? The one you mentioned yesterday?”

“Mrrr?”

I explained that we’d been seeing off Viscount Siemmen, then made my way inside.

“Welcome hooome?”

“Welcome back, sir!”

Tama and Pochi scampered over and clung to my legs.

As they were in the middle of rubbing up against me for head pats like usual, they noticed Miteruna and froze.

“Mew?!”

“Stranger danger, sir.”

The pair scurried behind me to hide.

“Don’t be rude to our guest, you two,” Liza scolded.

“Welcome home, master.”

“Master, your safe return is celebrated, I report.”

Once the whole group had gathered in the living room, I did a round of introductions.

“This is Miteruna, the head maid who’ll be in charge of the house.”

“A pleasure to meet you. Humble as I am, I will work my hardest to keep the house running smoothly. Thank you for having me.”

Noticing her ruler-straight back, the girls all adjusted their posture as well.

“I am the youngest elf of Bolenan Forest, Misanaria Bolenan, daughter of Lamisauya and Lilinatoa.”

“A-an elf?”

When Mia introduced herself, Miteruna gave a little utterance of surprise.

“I am Nana, I introduce. I belong to master, I declare.”

“Are you the lady of the house, then?” Miteruna asked.

“She is like family to me, but no, she’s not my wife or lover or anything,” I quickly responded, correcting this misunderstanding.

Mia pointed at herself and announced “Fiancée,” but fortunately Miteruna took it as a joke.

“Hello, I’m Lulu. I take care of cooking, cleaning, and such.”

“So you have another maid?”

“Ah, she’s like family, too, not a servant. Besides, I do some of the cooking as well.”

Miteruna inclined her head to Lulu. “My apologies, Mistress Lulu.”

“M-Mistress?!” Lulu quickly flailed her arms in front of her face, as if to wave off the title.

It was cute to see a different side of her.

“Tama.”

“Pochi’s Pochi, sir.”

“My name is Liza. We are master’s slaves, so if you have any jobs that need to be done, please call on us.”

The beastfolk girls seemed nervous.

“These girls are part of my family, too. Please treat them as such.”

“Your slaves are...?” Miteruna repeated in confusion, but she didn’t seem to want to disagree with her employer, so she simply bowed in quiet acknowledgment.

Then, last and most obnoxious...

“I’m Arisa. Lulu and I are master’s future wives!”

The other kids all joined in on this declaration, too.

Among them, I heard Lulu murmur, “Just five more years...” Evidently, she was taking our agreement to marry if neither of us was taken in five years very

seriously.

Miteruna smiled at everyone. “You all seem quite close,” she remarked.

Once introductions were taken care of, I started explaining the mansion’s facilities to Miteruna.

“This room—it couldn’t be...”

“It’s a bathroom. The drainage system isn’t finished yet, so we’ll have to employ someone to take care of it soon.”

Miteruna stared at the tub in surprise. Maybe she was a fan of baths, too.

“You’re welcome to use it, too, of course.”

“Th-thank you...very much.”

Huh? Her voice sounded strangely stiff.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but her expression seemed a little pained.

“I can’t believe such a nightmarish contraption exists in a city where water is so precious...”

She muttered under her breath, but I heard it with my “Keen Hearing” skill.

Did she actually hate baths, then?

“S-so, young master, where might the well be?”

Miteruna pulled herself together, straightening her expression.

As the head maid, she must be interested in the water source.

I led her out the back door of the kitchen and over to the well.

“The pulley is broken, so when I hire someone to add the drainage channels, I’ll ask them to repair that as well.”

“The bucket and rope seem fine, at least. Is it all right if I take a look at the well water?”

“I’ll get it?”

“Pochi’ll help, too, sir!”

As soon as Miteruna removed the cover and picked up the rope and bucket,

Tama and Pochi zipped over to help.

They probably wanted to prove useful to their new friend.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t ask you young ladies to—”

“Don’t worryyy?”

“We can do it, sir!”

Miteruna seemed uncertain, but with Tama and Pochi raring to go, I asked her to let them help.

The pair pulled up the water in a matter of moments and handed it to Miteruna, who thanked them.

However, she almost dropped it when they gave it to her. Maybe she wasn’t very strong.

“Oh? You pulled up this much so quickly? What remarkable young ladies you are.”

“Hee-hee?”

“Aw, I’m blushing, sir.”

Tama and Pochi wriggled bashfully.

Miteruna scooped some of the water into her palm and sipped it.

“This is very clean water.”

It looked like our water quality had passed her test.

“Next, the stove...”

We went back into the kitchen.

“It appears to be out of coal. Could you point me toward the storehouse?”

“I’m sorry,” said Lulu. “We haven’t bought any coal yet.”

Miteruna looked flummoxed. “I shall have to go and buy some before breakfast, then.”

“E-erm, what is the coal for exactly?”

“Why, the stove, of course.”

At that, Lulu slid the movable countertop aside, revealing the heating magic tool within.

The scent of warm milk filled the air. She must have been making milk porridge for our breakfast.

“In our house, we use this for cooking.”

“Is that a magic tool?”

“Yes. You can adjust the heat, too. It’s more convenient than the stove.”

Lulu looked a little proud as Miteruna reacted in surprise.

“A magic tool installed beneath the counter... Are the other cooking implements magic tools, too?”

“Yes, this one is an oven magic tool, and this is a water-drawing magic tool. We use a magic tool to heat up the bath, as well, so I can show you how to use that later.”

Lulu showed Miteruna each of the magic tools, and she reacted with surprise every time.

Viscount Siemmen’s house probably had plenty of magic cooking tools, too, but these ones were my own design. They were modeled after the built-in systems of Japanese kitchens, so they probably didn’t look like most other magic tools.

“A magic tool for drawing water...? You use such valuable water stones on a regular basis?”

“It’s time-consuming to go to the well each instance, after all.”

We used only about one pebble-size water stone a month; the daily cost breakdown wasn’t too high.

My Well Bag was a Space Magic item, so it worked completely differently, even though the end result was the same.

“There’s a water stone built into the tub, too. There’s no need to draw water for a bath.”

I demonstrated how to fill the bath with water.

“...Remarkable.”

Putting magic into the circuits that made the water flow, Miteruna murmured in wonderment.

So she didn't actually hate baths—just the amount of work that usually went into bringing in the water and boiling it.

Come to think of it, taking baths in the places we stayed in Seiryuu City and the old capital was such a production that it took several men to prepare everything.

Aside from that, since this was still a newly bought house and all, the tour ended fairly quickly.

I made sure to tell her not to go into the basement attached to my office, since that was for teleporting.

“What a wonderful home you have. I've never seen a place so thoroughly cleaned and repaired. My predecessor must have been very experienced.”

Miteruna gave a sigh of admiration.

It was actually Lelillil's magic that did all this, but I didn't want to ruin the moment for her, so I kept my mouth shut.

Instead, I handed Miteruna a pouch of silver and copper coins. She would probably need some capital with which to buy goods and supplies.

“Young master, a home-owning noble can buy things on credit, resulting in no need to entrust such a large sum of money to your servant.”

Oh right. I guess they'd had a credit system in the old capital, too.

Still, it was only twenty gold coins' worth, so I had her keep it just in case.

The other kids didn't seem to have eaten yet, either, so we went to the dining room for a late breakfast.

“So it's milk porridge for breakfast today, huh?”

“Mm, with honey.”

“It is sweet and delicious, I report.”

There seemed to be a little bit of lemon juice mixed in, cutting the sweetness for a refreshing taste that was the perfect way to start the day.

“We received a delivery of fresh milk this morning, so I decided to put it to use.”

“It’s delicious, Lulu.”

She blushed and smiled at my compliment.

“Mistress Lulu, is this color all right for the gratin?”

“Y-yes, that’s fine!”

I’d invited Miteruna to join us for breakfast, but she politely declined; it went against her personal policy for a servant to dine at the same table as their master.

She was every bit as serious as her appearance suggested.

Though she had an uncompromising nature, she would make a very trustworthy employee.

“Take this green plate to Mia, please.”

“Understood.”

Instead of bacon, Mia’s dish had mushroom slices and spinach.

The beastfolk girls still seemed hungry after the porridge, so they dug in to the gratin right away.

“Ouchie?”

“Sho hot, shir.”

Tama and Pochi started eating too fast and quickly reached for the water.

They’d probably been careless because the outside of the gratin wasn’t very hot.

“It’s hot on the inside, so be careful.”

“Aaaye?”

“Mr. Bacon is hiding inside, sir!”

Keeping an eye on the beastfolk girls, I started on my own gratin.

It was deliciously rich. Like with the porridge, adding fresh Celivera dullcattle milk seemed to make everything taste better.

“I used the dairy we got from the ranch.”

“It’s very good. Shall we make some pastries with it sometime, too?”

“Yes, master!”

Lulu beamed, so I smiled back at her, then set about finishing my breakfast before it got cold.

While we were relaxing in the living room so Miteruna could eat breakfast, Nana came back from checking in on the kids.

“Master, the larvae have awakened, I report.”

They’d started to regain consciousness the previous morning, but I gave them some nutritional supplement potion with a sleep-inducing agent so that they’d recover more quickly.

“Thank you for saving us, Mr. Noble.”

““““Thank you.””””

As soon as I entered the room, the kids all prostrated themselves and thanked me.

Thanks to their youthful vigor and the magic recovery potions, they seemed to be all right to get out of bed now.

At that moment, Miteruna rejoined us, having finished her breakfast.

That seemed a little fast. She really ought to savor her food more.

“Young master, are these children your family, too?”

“No, we’ve just been looking after them here.”

I briefly explained the situation that led to us nursing them back to health.

“Please, Mr. Noble, let us make it up to you!”

The eldest child gazed at me earnestly, but Miteruna stepped between us.

“Know your place. Working in a noble’s mansion is not as easy as you may think. If you simply hope to make a living, seek work elsewhere.”

“It’s not that! We just want to thank him.”

The eldest kid responded strongly to Miteruna’s cold words.

“Mr. Noble’s the only person who saved us from dying unwanted.”

“He healed all our hurtful pain.”

“He was nice t’us.”

“He fixed my leg that wouldn’t work.”

“We were happy!”

The other kids supported the eldest’s statement with their limited vocabulary.

Miteruna simply stared back at the children quietly.

For some reason, my kids were gathered by the door, too, watching with bated breath.

“...Very well.”

Miteruna sighed and turned to me.

“Young master, if you’ll permit it, I would like to temporarily hire these children for some odd jobs. I will take care to teach them the minimum level of proper manners, too.”

Judging by her willingness to take on all this trouble, Miteruna was actually quite kind.

“Sure, let’s hire them. We’ll have to get them some work clothes, though.”

“Very well. I shall go to a secondhand store later to purchase appropriate clothing.”

“Great, thanks.”

Not long after, a bell rang at the door. Miteruna went to answer it and then returned with a letter. It was a message from the guild, saying that our bronze badges were ready to be picked up.

Just as I was reading this letter, someone else arrived, so I brought them into

the living room.

“Ayaumeee?”

“Mr. Kajiro, too, sir!”

The new visitors were the Saga Empire samurai duo Kajiro and Ayaume.

“Tama, Pochi. Have you been training?”

“Aaaye?”

“Your leg, sir!”

“Oh, this? Yes, I’m afraid a monster in the labyrinth took a big bite out of me.”

Kajiro chuckled lightly, but his left leg was missing from the knee down.

“Does it huuurt?”

“Pain, pain, go away, sir.”

Tama and Pochi tearfully approached his leg, casting a little charm on his injury.

“You’re both very kind. Don’t worry—it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

Kajiro smiled gently at the pair.

“As long as you still have your life, you can surely recover from anything, I declare.”

“That’s right! I couldn’t call myself a samurai if I let a little thing like this bring me down.”

He responded to Nana’s encouragement with bravado.

“I have a friend who’s an excellent magic tool craftsman, so I’ll see if he can’t make a prosthetic leg for you, Sir Kajiro.”

“Thank you. I’ll take you up on your kindness, if you don’t mind, Sir Pendragon.”

I thought I caught a glimmer of something in Kajiro’s and Ayaume’s eyes as they bowed their heads, but I pretended not to have noticed.

“I’ve requested Sir Kajiro and Miss Ayaume here to keep the house safe.

Miteruna, could you show them to their rooms?”

The children didn’t seem to need any more nursing, so surely three adults could keep an eye on the children we’d hired for weeding and cleaning.

Because the carriage we had here couldn’t carry eight people, we decided to take a stroll to the explorers’ guild.



“This is strange, indeed.”

On a slightly elevated platform near the west guild, I spotted the noble in green gazing at the crowds around the street stalls.

For once, he wore a peevish look instead of his usual smile.

“It shouldn’t be this weak, indeed...”

What was weak?

We were fairly far away from him, so I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I was a little curious to find out.

“Damn it!”

A young explorer came from the direction the noble in green was looking in, scratching his head with one hand.

“What’re you yelling about?”

“Milinda’s sake is getting watery again.”

“The sake there’s always weak, isn’t it?”

“I’m tellin’ ya: It’s gotten even weaker!”

The noble in green couldn’t have been talking about the sake, right...?

I looked back in his direction, but he’d already disappeared into the crowd.

Judging by the marker on my radar, he was heading over to the street stalls to investigate.

“Unhand me, fiend! Thou art a brute!”

My “Keen Hearing” skill heard Princess Meetia shouting from the direction of the west guild.

Looking that way, I saw Princess Meetia flailing angrily in Sokell's grasp.

The squire was guarding her, but she was too timid to stop a noble like Sokell.

I couldn't just ignore a friend in trouble.

Closing the map, I told my group that I was going on ahead, then sped toward the guild building, prepared for trouble.

"Sir Satou!" Princess Meetia shouted my name shrilly when she noticed me.

When our eyes met, Sokell's face twisted with hatred. "You ought to treat a lady more gently, sir."

He had Princess Meetia's slender arms tight in his grasp, so I pried off his hand one finger at a time, taking care not to break them.

Distressingly, he left a hand-shaped mark on Princess Meetia's arms.

"Y-you violent little brat!" Sokell glared at me, nursing the hand I'd pried away.

What a rude thing to say after I was polite enough not to break his fingers.

"What's going on here, indeed?"

"L-Lord Poputema!"

The noble in green had appeared.

"I believe you are meant to be under house arrest, indeed."

At that, Sokell growled and stomped off furiously.

"What a troublesome fellow, indeed," the noble in green murmured, but he was watching him leave with a satisfied smile.

Somehow, his words and actions never quite seemed to match his expressions.

"I thank thee, Sir Satou."

"Not at all. I'm glad I was able to be of some help."

I smiled at the princess.

"Are you all right, Your Highness?"

“Mm, heal. ■■■■...”

When my group caught up, they saw the bruises on Princess Meetia’s arms and let out cries of concern.

“What happened, exactly?” I asked.

“Harrumph. The cur continues to propose marriage to me, though I have declined many a time.”

As the princess sighed glumly, she was bathed in the light of Mia’s Healing Magic.

“I thank thee as well, Lady Misanaria.”

“Just Mia.”

Once Arisa found out what happened, she scolded the squire until the stern-faced knight arrived from the direction of the nobles’ quarters and led the two away.



“Hello, we’ve come to get our updated badges. Is this window all right?”

Making my way to a service window at the busy west guild, I held up the letter we’d received.

“No, please proceed to the guildmaster’s office. An attendant will guide you there.”

“Yessss, it’s all happening!”

Arisa got excited about the receptionist’s words, pumping her fists in the air.

Her triumphant shouting startled the receptionist, who shrank away.

“Arisa, try to keep it down when we’re in public, please.”

I dealt Arisa a light bop on the head.

“Ziiip?”

“Arisa, you hafta zip your lips, sir.”

Having been scolded by even Tama and Pochi, Arisa pouted, so Liza lifted her under one arm.

She hung limp as a corpse, like Tama and Pochi usually did.

“I apologize for all the fuss.”

The guild employee accepted my apology with a wry smile.

Before long, an official-looking woman in her thirties approached us.

She was attended by two staff members, meaning she must have been fairly important.

“Are you Sir Pendragon?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Hello. I’m Ushana, the guildmaster’s secretary. Please follow me to the guildmaster’s office.”

Although Arisa’s reaction had been excessive, I didn’t think just anyone would get to meet the guildmaster just for earning their bronze badges.

This was probably about the rumors I’d heard in the bar that we had acquired our spoils through some foul means.

We followed Miss Ushana up the stairs. It appeared that the guildmaster’s office was in one of the spires of the west guild.

“Guildmaster, I’ve brought Sir Pendragon and his party members.”

Miss Ushana entered, while the rest of us waited outside the door.

Then, before long...

“Sir Pendragon, do come in. Alone.”

...an old woman’s voice that must have been the guildmaster’s invited me into the room.

Then a cane came flying toward me.

It was as sharp as a spear on the end, jabbing toward my eyes the second I opened the door.

The strike was sharper than even Liza’s spear, but I parried it lightly with one hand.

The attacker swung the deflected cane around and attacked me again from

the opposite side.

What is this, extreme cane fighting?

The long cane kept coming at me, so I kept blocking and parrying.

What was this person trying to do?

The unprompted attack finally stopped when Miss Ushana appeared from the next room over.

“Guildmaster! If you don’t stop this mischief, Lady Sebelkeya will scold you again!”

“Tch, and it was just getting interesting... Right, Satou?”

The person who’d been attacking me with the long cane was the guildmaster.

She was an eighty-seven-year-old woman, which was why I’d just been dodging and blocking her attacks without striking back.

She was a level-52 magic user, with the “Blaze Magic” and “Light Magic” skills.

“My apologies, but I don’t particularly enjoy being ambushed.”

I wished she would follow the example of the serenely composed head priestess of the Tenion Temple instead of acting so immature.

“Oh, come now. Surely a man who spent days in the labyrinth on his very first trip and recovered more than a hundred cores must be a lover of battle?”

Excuse me?

The number wasn’t the problem. It was the fact that she said I did it.

“My party members are the ones who did the fighting. I was just watching over them.”

“Ha! Who would believe such rubbish? Even if that was true, the monsters must’ve been too weak to be worth fighting them yourself, right?”

No, that wasn’t why I didn’t fight. I stayed out of it because I knew they could defeat those monsters without my help.

“Besides, isn’t that sword made by old Dohal? That geezer wouldn’t give a sword he crafted himself to just anybody. If you want to hide your strength,

you'd better cover that seal with some cloth or something."

I was already hiding enough of my strength. I didn't want to have to hide my sword, too.

"Elder Dohal is a drinking buddy of mine."

I couldn't tell her that I had made the sword along with Elder Dohal.

As soon as I said "drinking buddy," the guildmaster's eyes glinted like a predator spotting its next prey.

"Is that right? Then perhaps you and I should be drinking buddies, too?"

"Certainly. I'd be happy to provide some drinks and snacks, if you like."

I wasn't thrilled about her battle-crazy nature, but she did seem to have the same air of likability as Elder Dohal.

While I wouldn't want to deal with a complaining geriatric, I had the feeling I'd get to hear a lot of old stories about Labyrinth City if I drank with this person.

In short, I'd made my second drinking friend in Labyrinth City after General Erthal.

Still, I'd like to hang out with some men my age, to trade stupid stories with once in a while.

"All right, let's party!"

"Hold it."

The guildmaster's excitement was halted by Miss Ushana, who'd returned carrying a box.

"First, please award these guild badges to their recipients."

"Tch. Fine, fiiine."

The guildmaster grumbled as she accepted the box from Miss Ushana.

At that moment...

"Guildmaster! That Pendragon fellow is here, they say!"

A haughty-looking woman burst into the room, shrieking hysterically.

I'd seen her face somewhere before.

"Knock before entering, please."

"Pendragon! This is the brat Lord Sokell spoke of!"

Ignoring Miss Ushana, the haughty woman pointed at me and shouted. How rude.

Her words jogged my memory, though: She was the staff member I'd seen with Sokell in the west guild before.

"Guildmaster! Why is Pendragon receiving a bronze badge after he committed fraud?!"

"Because you're the only one who claims he committed fraud, and you have no proof."

The woman protested loudly, but the guildmaster was dismissive.

"If you didn't commit fraud, then prove it by submitting to the analyzer's test! You'll do that, right, Pendragon?! If you didn't lie, then you have to prove it!"

The way she was repeating herself was annoying, but I'd undergone a similar analysis from an assistant secretary after I saw a hydra in Kuhanou County, so I didn't mind as long as it didn't take too long.

"All right, I can—"

"Just a moment, Satou."

I was about to agree, but the guildmaster stopped me firmly.

"You're asking a noble, with a title no less, to undergo an analyst's examination? Do you have any idea what you're saying?"

The guildmaster was so furious that I could practically see flames burning in her eyes.

The haughty young woman turned pale and took a step back.

"But... But... But..."

While the woman repeated the same word like a broken record, the guildmaster continued.

“Your request is an insult to a vassal of another lord. I presume you are prepared to crush your family’s trading company’s reputation?”

The word *insult* reminded me of something I’d heard in the class for new nobility in the Muno Barony.

Having a noble to undergo an analyst’s examination meant that you didn’t trust them even if they swore on their family name and the name of King Yamato, making it an insult of the highest order.

“Or is it that you’re trying to provoke young Satou into setting the dishonorable precedent that he has taken an analyst’s examination? Are you setting him up for an even bigger trap?”

The guildmaster glared at the haughty woman with enough intensity to turn her into stone.

It looked like the woman might faint from the stress at any moment.

“N-no, that’s...”

“Out with it, then! If you are truly in the employ of this guild, you should prioritize the interests of the guild over those of your lover!”

That was the final blow: The woman collapsed to the floor, practically frothing at the mouth.

“Get her out of here. She’s being dismissed from her post. Ushana, make up some reason on the paperwork, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I guess in a feudal society, you could fire people for any reason you wanted.

“What? Hurry up and file the paperwork.”

The guildmaster frowned at Ushana, who smiled and didn’t budge.

“I shall go as soon as you award Sir Pendragon his new guild badge.”

“Oh, fine. We’ll party after that.”

The guildmaster opened the box, producing enough guild badges for our whole group.

“Satou, take this garnet badge.”

Huh? I thought we were getting bronze badges?

“Oh, don’t look so surprised. That straitlaced noble has been talking up your achievements to anyone who will listen.”

Oh right. Viscount Siemmen had gone to great lengths to get a rescue party together for me.

“I believe he called you the ‘Savior of Muno City’ and the ‘Demon Slayer of Gururian City,’ no? One of our best men was there in that Gururian City incident. Do you remember him?”

Nobody came to mind. It must have been one of the people who were fighting the demon before we showed up.

Could it be the warrior with the big shield who was fighting alongside Sir Ipasa?

“We got a report from him, too. Lesser or no, a party that defeated a demon without a scratch deserves more than a wood or bronze badge.”

“Still, a mithril badge would be too much,” Ushana added. “You’d have to at least defeat a middle-grade demon for that.”

“Hmph, if only the guild board of trustees would’ve agreed to it, you could’ve set a new record.”

I guess the guildmaster had planned to give us all mithril badges instead.

Silently, I thanked the trustees for their good sense.

I heard Arisa mutter, “Tch, damn trustees!” as she peered in through the crack of the door, but if you ask me, we were better off this way.

“Now, about the garnet badge...”

Miss Ushana explained our new badges.

Of course, the entire group received their garnet badges, not just me.

Normally, they were awarded only to bronze-badge explorers who brought back high-quality cores to the guild over a long period of time, but they’d made an exception for us.

It often took five to ten years, so just getting these garnet badges seemed like it would attract trouble.

“Are you sure about this? We’ve only gone into the labyrinth once.”

“The guildmaster has the authority to give out garnet badges and lower as she wishes. It must be within reason, of course, but we’ve yet to award any this year. I’m sure there will be no complaints from the royal capital.”

Miss Ushana went on to explain the benefits of our new garnet badges.

There were all kinds of little perks, like getting half off all guild handling charges and rent through the guild.

I had no shortage of money, though, so I didn’t really care about that.

“Finally, and this is the most important point...”

Why didn’t you start with it, then?

“...anyone with a garnet badge is considered a quasi-noble. Unlike your title of hereditary knight, it does not come with a noble’s special privileges, but it does grant the holder social status equivalent to that of a knight. This is guaranteed by the Shigan king, so it applies not only within the kingdom but in other kingdoms as well.”

Of course, this applied to demi-humans as well as humans. That meant that inns and such could no longer refuse service to the beastfolk girls, even in a prejudiced place like Seiryuu City.

“That’s quite remarkable.”

“You may already be aware of this, but although we are called the explorers’ guild, we are actually managed by the Shiga Kingdom department of labyrinth resources. The guildmaster also takes on the role of the minister of labyrinth resources, which grants her the status of an honorary count, allowing her the authority to grant such privileges.”

I thanked Ushana for her explanation.

I’d already known the first half of that, but the fact that the guildmaster was considered a minister was news to me.

I had assumed the position was something like middle management, but it was actually much more impressive.

Out of curiosity, I asked about the mithril badges and learned that they granted the holder an honorary noble title on behalf of the Shigan king.

“By the way, Satou. Is tonight a good time for that party?”

“I have a prior engagement this evening. Is tomorrow night all right?”

I had already made plans to throw a welcome party for Miteruna and the samurai pair that night.

“Tch, fine. I’ll allow it. By the way, a little birdie told me that young whippersnapper Erthal got his hands on some extremely good liquor…”

Can you really call General Erthal a “young whippersnapper”?

She was probably talking about the rum and fairy wine, both of which I had in plentiful stock, so I had no problem giving some to her.

However, I was a little concerned that she’d given us a special promotion just so she could get her hands on that liquor.

“Wh-why are you looking at me like that? It’s not what you think. The promotion and the liquor are totally unrelated!”

I was still a little suspicious of the shifty guildmaster, but Miss Ushana backed her up, so it seemed safe to assume that it was a genuine promotion.

After I promised that we’d have a drinking party the following night, we left the guildmaster’s office.

“Yahooooo! We got a special promotion from the guildmasterrrr!”

Arisa jumped in the air, raising both arms triumphantly.

She had probably restrained herself near the office, since she got scolded before.

“Hooraaaay?”

“Banzai, sir!”

Tama and Pochi jumped up and down, too, so high I thought they might hit

their heads on the ceiling.

You have to know how to control your own strength, you know?

“I’m happy they seem to have evaluated us highly.”

“Agreed, Lulu.”

“Mm, great.”

“Our high assessment is worthy of celebration, I report.”

The other girls were staying composed, but they seemed to be happy, too.

I shared in their delight as we all headed for the exit.

“Indeeeed?”

“It’s the green man, sir.”

Tama and Pochi had spotted the noble in green, who was accompanying some nobles’ children registering at a teller’s window.

The most stuck-up-looking child was the third son of the viceroy and looked nothing like his older brother Rayleigh.

There was a wide variety of other children, including a pretty young girl with a saber, an intellectual-looking young man, an exceedingly ordinary-looking boy, and a somewhat crafty-looking boy.

I didn’t particularly know any of them, so we just proceeded home, discussing plans for the welcome party as we went.

Then, after a lavish welcome party and the following day’s drinking party with the guildmaster that felt a bit like a witches’ Sabbath, we were finally able to go back into the labyrinth the next day.

Oh right. I also slipped a letter into the guildmaster’s office with information about the demonic potion stash in Sokell’s basement, including the hidden door leading to the sewers, which I discovered with my map and the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance.

While I was at it, I also wrote down information about the ghost town on the outskirts of Labyrinth City where demonic potions were hidden and the locations of a few criminal guilds’ stashes, too.

The guildmaster hated demonic potions, so she would probably take care of the rest.



“Kinda seems like it goes all the way to hell.”

Arisa stared down into the pitch-black hollow.

We were in the labyrinth, farther along the path from the barracks that only garnet-badge holders and up were allowed to use.

In the center of the large cavern was a giant hole almost two hundred feet across, which led down to the middle floor.

“Looks like you take that elevator below.”

There was enough room in the elevator for all of us, so we decided to take it and check out the lower area.

“We won’t get attacked by monsters while we’re on the elevator, will we?”

“It’ll be fine.”

Even if we were attacked, I could protect us, and if the elevator broke, I could use “Skylrunning” and Magic Hand to get us back up.

“It’s a manual elevator?!”

“Spiiiiin?”

“Round and round, sir.”

Arisa was alarmed, but Tama and Pochi gleefully started turning the crank right away.

They got tired partway down, so Liza and Nana took over.

Once we’d passed into a new map area, I used my “Search Entire Map” skill.

It was a bit smaller than the upper floor but had a similar floor map.

I picked a random area and investigated, but the only difference was that the average level of monsters was slightly higher, and there were more of them with special abilities.

It wasn’t like a game, where the monsters’ levels usually went up drastically

when you went down a floor.

Aside from this pit, there was one other route that connected the middle to the upper floors.

This pit also seemed to continue down to the bottom floor, so I figured I would check it out when nobody else was around.

“There are a lot of people here,” Lulu observed.

The elevator landing area of the middle floor contained a supply area for Red Dragon’s Roar members, where several explorers were working busily.

According to my map, there were only two passages from here: one that was exclusively for the Red Dragon’s Roar party for defeating the floormaster and one that was being blocked by the doctors’ and alchemists’ guilds.

“Are they transporting moss?”

“It looks like that moss is a magic potion ingredient.”

According to Trazayuya’s recipes, that moss could be used as is for lesser recovery potions or concentrated to make intermediate recovery potions.

“Doesn’t look like we can go anywhere down here.”

“Yeah, let’s head back up.”

I might be able to convince them to let us through, but there was no need to do that when there were plenty of other monsters around.

We piled back onto the elevator and returned to the upper floor.



“Okay, slicing up tough enemies with Space Magic is seriously addictive.”

Once we got back to the top floor, I led the way to some moderately tough areas, and we spent six days exploring them.

In each area, we found a safe place to put a teleportation seal stone, as we were still spending nights in the labyrinth vacation home we’d built on our first visit.

“Arisa, gemfish make good material for armor, so try not to chop them up too much.”

“Oh dear, really? I’ll just cut them clean in half, then.”

Gemfish were translucent fish as hard as diamonds.

Their scales weren’t actually made of diamonds, but since they were transparent and around the same hardness, they were also useful for accessories, magic tools, and so on.

“Turtle’s neeext?”

“Bloodred turtles can be cooked and eaten, I report.”

A gigantic turtle protected by a translucent shell the color of a pigeon-blood ruby followed Tama toward the group.

This was the final target in the area we were currently conquering.

“It breathes fire! Be careful! It can’t fly, but it’ll jump and try to head-butt you! And, Mia, its shell is impervious to lesser magic, so be careful!”

“Mm, got it.”

Once Arisa gave her orders, the battle began.

It wasn’t a terribly strong enemy, but since only intermediate magic or higher worked on it, it could be fairly annoying.

Based on prior experience, it would probably be a long battle, so I amused myself by checking on the house with Space Magic, chatting with friends in Bolenan Forest and the southern islands, and so on while still keeping an eye on the battle.

Finally, the monster went down.

“Ugh, leveling up past thirty sure requires a lot of EXP.”

“Maybe it’s because there aren’t many strong enemies left around here?”

We’d conquered three areas in the past six days, but the girls were still only level 36.

Mia required more experience to level up than the others, so in order to keep her from getting left behind, Mia and I took care of most of the monsters in the third area.

“Well, it’s almost our scheduled return day. Shall we go back up?”

I’d registered with the explorers’ guild that we’d be back within a trimoon, which was ten days, but I’d told Miteruna and the others that we’d return within seven.

Besides, since the Dragonpen Trading Company ship had arrived at the trade city Tartumina the day we entered the labyrinth, they would probably be reaching Celivera in the next few days.

“Come on—let’s at least place a seal slate in the next area before we go back.”

“All right. Does anyone have requests for our next area?”

I looked around at the group.

“Meeeat?”

“I want some tasty meat, too, sir.”

“Red meat is of course delicious, but bird meat would be nice, too.”

“Mrrr, mushrooms.”

“I’d like somewhere with a good balance between meat and vegetables.”

“A frog area would be good, so we can bring back meat for the larvae, I request.”

Um, guys... I was asking what kind of battlefield you’d like, not what kind of ingredients.

“Master!”

Arisa, at least, seemed serious.

“Let’s put seal slates in all of them and then go around one by one! That way we won’t get sick of one kind of food.”

That made sense food-wise, but it still wasn’t what I was asking.

“Oh, all right. Want to check out each area in turn, then?”

This might be naive, but since we were doing this level grinding so that the girls would be better able to survive, I figured they should at least enjoy the

process.

I'd already investigated each of the surrounding areas, so I looked for places that would fit everyone's requests.

"Sorry, but there don't seem to be any areas that are mainly bird monsters."

"I see..."

There was a cockatrice area, but I didn't want to risk getting turned to stone just for some poultry.

Still, Liza looked disappointed, so I searched for areas that had some amount of birds.

"The ancient land beast area has archaeopteryx monsters and many kinds of meat, too. And the area next to it is partially underwater, meaning there should be plenty of plant and aquatic monsters."

"Ancient land beast?"

"Judging by what I saw with the Clairvoyance spell, that seems to be the term for dinosaur-like monsters."

The mosasaurus I saw in the southern seas was called an "ancient sea beast," too.

The boss of the half-underwater area looked like a giant floating jack-o'-lantern, so we'd be able to make tons of pumpkin pie.

Using shortcuts by way of Arisa's and my magic, we finished setting teleport points by the following morning.

When I opened my map to teleport us back, I saw that an acquaintance of ours was in trouble nearby, so we all went to help.



"Th-thanks for your help."

"Try not to speak. It looks like you have a few broken ribs."

The people we'd helped were from the labyrinth army.

Mia's wide-range healing Water Magic spell rescued the soldiers from the verge of death.

“Master, we’ve defeated the soldier mantis and the war mantis.”

“Thank you, Liza. If there are any injured folks who can’t move, give them these potions, please.”

“Understood.”

Wearing armbands with a red cross symbol, my group went around calling out for surviving soldiers.

“Sir Pendragon, you should get out of here fast. They’ll be back with more monsters soon.”

It was hard to recognize him through the blood, but it was Captain Zeorun, the man who’d been on his way to rescue me at Viscount Siemmen’s request before.

“Who is ‘they’?”

“Ludaman and his plunderers.”

Searching the map, I saw that the person called Ludaman was a little ways away.

I didn’t think he would come here himself, but that didn’t mean we were safe.

I saw on my map that there were plunderers running toward us with monsters following them in several of the passages connected to this cave.

As I continued to watch the map display, I witnessed a number of the people disappear, and the monsters in two of the passages stopped in place.

They must have been using their underlings as disposable bait for the monsters.

“Liza, I’ll take care of things here. You and the others go defeat the chain rampages that are coming this way.”

“Understood, sir. Shall we leave Mia behind to heal?”

“No, the severely wounded have already been cured, so I can handle the rest with the potions I have on hand.”

I entrusted my group to defeat the monsters.

“Don’t be rash, Sir Pendragon. Perhaps they could deal with a handful, but there are countless monsters out there.”

“It’ll be all right. They know how to fight when they’re greatly outnumbered.”

There were indeed a lot of monsters coming this way, but they were so weak, they wouldn’t even count as practice for my kids with how strong they were now, so I wasn’t worried. Arisa’s Space Magic was especially good at defense anyway.

I smiled at the concerned captain and started handing out potions and nutrition supplements so that his soldiers could move again.

As I was keeping an eye on Ludaman, the Plunderer King, I noticed another acquaintance’s marker nearby.

They hadn’t made contact yet, and she seemed to have plenty of strong guards with her, but I was prepared to go to her rescue at any time just in case.

Princess Meetia's Adventure

It is I, Princess Meetia. Having grown tired of a dull life in my homeland, I made no hesitation in departing when I received a request from Marquis Ashinen of the Shiga Kingdom to heal a young woman's ailment.

"Thank you, Lady Meetia."

Miss Shina, the viceroy's fourth daughter, thanked me upon receiving my Breath of Purification.

"Think nothing of it. I am relieved to finally fulfill the duty for which purpose I came."

Until the viceroy and his wife returned, Sir Sokell had been preventing me from carrying out the healing.

"It's only natural. My parents entrusted Lord Sokell with taking care of us, after all."

The sickly Miss Shina defended Sir Sokell.

Sir Sokell had handsome features, if nothing else, so he was easily able to deceive the naive young Miss Shina.

"Lady Meetia, would you like some sweets?"

"Certainly, thank you."

The pastries of the Shiga Kingdom were a mite too sweet for my tastes, but they were still a delicacy that I could never acquire in my homeland.

My nurse maid stated that sugar was worth its weight in gold.

Thus, I decided to partake as my reward for healing Miss Shina.

Eventually, the young lady grew tired from speaking too much, so her lady-in-waiting suggested that we bring the tea party to an end.

"It seems that Lady Shina has taken a liking to you, Your Highness."

"Why, yes, we appear similar in age, so it is an easy thing to converse."

I was actually four years her elder, but due to my youthful appearance, I

looked the same age as the ten-year-old Miss Shina.

It was nothing unusual for those around me to treat me as such, though it still caused some pain to my ego.

Even Sir Satou, who was scarcely any older than I, treated me like a child.

Still, that fine fellow treated even Lady Misanaria the elf as a child, despite her undoubtedly wise soul, so perhaps it was nothing personal.

As I made my way back to my room, I spotted the plump figure of Sir Gerits, the third son of the viceroy, in the hall near the garden.

It appeared that his friends had come to visit today, as well.

“Wow, you really do have a bronze badge! That’s amazing, Jance!”

“Did you get that cousin of yours with a garnet badge to bring you along?”

“More or less. As the eldest son of Count Fudai, I thought I ought to have a bronze badge at the very least.”

The young man, who had short tawny-brown hair and a rather cruel face, looked smug as he responded to the other boys’ questions.

If memory served, the stout boy with the black hair was Baron Lalupott’s fourth son, Peison, and the short, clever-looking blond boy was Viscount Gohato’s third son, Sir Dirun.

Sir Gerits and his close friend—Baron Tokey’s second son, Sir Luram—didn’t seem amused.

“H-hmph! I bet you just hid behind your cousin and threw rocks!”

“Yeah, yeah! You’ve never even beat Mary-Ann in a sword fight, so there’s no way you could beat a monster!”

On hearing this, Baronet Dyukeli’s eldest daughter, Miss Mary-Ann, swiftly drew her rapier and pointed it at Sir Luram’s face.

“Are you saying you think monsters are stronger than my sword?”

“Th-that’s not what I meant. C’mon—get your sword outta my face, will ya?”

Sir Luram pulled his face away nervously. He should not have spoken out of

line if he was so frightened of her.

Or perhaps this was just how friends interacted?

I must confess I was a mite jealous.

Thanks to Sir Satou, I now had a gold badge, but Ravna and the others would never allow me to enter the labyrinth.

The most I could do was hang about the explorers' guild and hear the veterans' tales of glory.

After all, I lost heart after two days of sword training, I could not produce a single fireball even after two years of magic training, and my sole ability of note was my Breath of Purification.

Gazing at the Nolork family crest emblazoned on my dagger, I heaved a deep sigh.

"There you are, Master Gerits."

"Oh, it's Sokell. Need something?"

Looking up, I saw that Sir Sokell had entered the building and was approaching Sir Gerits with a smile he never showed to anyone ranked beneath him.

"Congratulations. You've been granted permission."

"Permission? To enter the labyrinth?!"

"Yes, I managed to convince your esteemed parents."

"Great job!"

"Master Gerits, me too! Take me with you!"

Sir Peison quickly pressed closer to Sir Gerits.

Hearing that, his other friends clamored to join him as well.

I would have liked to join them myself, but since I had declined Sir Sokell's marriage proposal, I could hardly request that he help me enter the labyrinth.

"Restraint is not a virtue, indeed?"

Turning around, I saw a strange noble dressed all in green.

I must confess, this person frightened me.

Aside from his manner of dress and strange way of ending sentences, he was the picture of a perfect noble, an older man who was polite even to those below him. Yet, when those eyes looked upon me, I felt as if he might swallow me whole.

It was only my instincts, not logic, that told me to keep my distance from this person.

“I—I shall go back to my room forthwith.”

“You wish to go to the labyrinth with those children, indeed? I shall acquire permission from Lady Ravna, indeed.”

The offer was too tempting to resist. I hesitated a moment, then nodded despite myself.

After that, Sir Poputema somehow managed to convince Ravna, and I found myself going to the labyrinth with Sir Gerits and his friends.



“Where’s Sokell?”

“I’m afraid he is currently under house arrest, so he’s unable to come along on today’s exploration.”

One of the viceroy’s guardian knights responded to Sir Gerits.

The night after Sir Sokell proposed the labyrinth expedition, some circumstances led to him being confined in his home.

Why, then, would he deliberately leave his home to come propose to me again anyway?

Sir Sokell had been even more frightening than usual the previous day, with madness in his eyes.

Squire Ryula was too enamored with Sir Sokell’s good looks to defend me. If Sir Satou had not come to my rescue, he might even have forced a kiss upon me.

Alas, just imagining such a thing sent a shiver down my spine.

“My colleagues and I will protect you. Please feel secure in enjoying your labyrinth exploration.”

“Cool, thanks.”

Aside from the viceroy’s two knights, each of Sir Gerits’s friends also brought a few of their family guards, so we had quite a large group. My guardian knight Ravna and squire Ryula were with me, too.

Unfortunately, this meant that the other explorers around us were all taking note of us.

For some reason, some of them even said things like “Awww, what a cute little princess.”

This seemed rather rude, but since they surely intended it as a compliment, I allowed it to pass.

“You must be Sir Gerits, correct? I am Lurahgiu, the explorer Sir Sokell entrusted to guide you.”

This man’s eyes looked like he might betray us at any moment.

Worse yet, he had a strange scent of rotten meat that made me wrinkle my nose.

I seemed to be the only one who was bothered, so I kept such comments to myself, but I would still be careful not to get close to this man.

“Okay. I guess Sokell’s not coming today, but thanks for guiding us.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

Lurahgiu ducked his head toward Sir Gerits, then took to the front of the group and led us into the hall leading to the labyrinth.

Though feeling a trifle anxious, my heart was full of excitement as my first trek into the labyrinth began.



“Here we go. ■ ■ ■...■ **Wind Shot Kofuudan!**”

The Wind Magic user Sir Dirun sent the foremost goblin flying with his spell.

As the goblin attempted to rise, the explorer Lurahgiu quickly ran up and

pinned it down with his spear.

“Nice one, Dirun! Now it’s my turn!”

“Wait, me too!”

Sir Gerits and Miss Mary-Ann rushed over to the fallen goblin with their swords in hand.

“Wait up, Master Gerits...”

“I’m coming, too!”

Sir Luram and Sir Peison followed after the others.

“Don’t you wish to join them, Princess Meetia?”

Sir Jance kindly noticed that I was hanging back.

“N-no, I thank thee. It does not quite sit right with me to torment a monster that can no longer move.”

“There’s not much choice when you’re just starting out. It’s difficult to properly start training at first if the monster hasn’t been brought down already.”

Since Sir Jance already had his bronze badge, perhaps it was true that this was the ordinary way of things, but I still could not feel good about it.

Perhaps sensing my feelings, Sir Jance simply smiled at me and walked over to the goblin.

“Hey, guide. There’s not enough monsters here,” Sir Gerits complained as one of his attendants wiped the goblin’s blood off his face.

Unbothered by Sir Gerits’s attitude, our guide, Sir Lurahgiu, simply smiled.

“In that case, might I recommend area 11?”

Immediately, one of the viceroy’s knights drew his sword and pointed it at the explorer.

“What are you plotting? Area 11 is extremely dangerous—that’s where the knight killers lurk.”

The other guardians all stirred at this.

“Please calm down. The place I am suggesting is a little-known spot with no knight killers to be found. While you knights with your heavy armor would likely be safe, I am too lightly protected to even think to guide you to a place where a knight killer might be.”

The man sucked in his cheeks, sweating under the furious gazes of all the knights.

“I want to see this place.”

“Nooo, knight killers are scary...”

“Shut up, Luram. You can go home if you’re chicken.”

“Aw, geez...”

A nervous-looking Sir Luram attempted to dissuade Sir Gerits.

“It is too dangerous, Master Gerits.”

The viceroy’s knights agreed with Sir Luram, but Sir Gerits would not be persuaded.

“You’ll protect us, though, right? Father always speaks so highly of your strength.”

Their pride inflated by Sir Gerits’s words, the knights agreed, and we set out for this area-11 place.

Even taking frequent breaks, those of us who had never entered the labyrinth were unable to keep up with all this exercise, and soon we had to ride on a Floating Board produced by a Practical Magic user among the guardians.

Eventually, the unchanging scenery of the labyrinth lulled us into a light doze, so it was only when Squire Ryula woke me that I knew we had arrived.

“That was pretty comfortable. I’ll ask Father to give you a reward.”

Sir Gerits nodded appreciatively to the Practical Magic user, then stretched.

“There is a monster nest at the bottom of this cliff, so take care not to stray too close to the edge.”

Our hunting grounds was a large, cylindrical cave with light stones in the walls.

The glowing stones were sparse, resulting in the place being darker than the sign stone-lit passages, as if the cliff continued all the way down into hell.

However, Sir Gerits did not seem to share my trepidation.

“Okay, hurry up and bring some monsters.”

“Right away, young sire.”

With that, the hunting began.

The monsters in the area Sir Lurahgiu had guided us to were weak enough for us to defeat even on our own, and there were many more down below the cliff.

Our guardian knights and priests protected us as we continued hunting monsters.

“All right! I leveled up!”

Sir Gerits jumped up and down excitedly.

He had been quite envious when the Wind Magic user Sir Dirun and the rapier-wielding Miss Mary-Ann had leveled up before him, so it only followed that he would be so thrilled now.

I couldn't get left behind.

The others, like Sir Luram and the serious Sir Peison, seemed to feel the same way.

“I'll definitely be next!”

“Bring on more monsters!”

“Certainly, dears.”

The voice that responded to the two boys was a woman's voice that I hadn't heard before.

“Who's that?!”

The viceroy's knights whirled around.

“Over there!”

The sharp-eyed Sir Jance pointed at a figure that had appeared on a nearby ledge.

“A plunderer?!”

“That’s right. I’m Derrin the Dagger Princess. How about I slice up your cute little friends with my daggers?” She nastily licked the daggers she held in each hand.

“A plunderer wouldn’t attack alone. Keep an eye on your surroundings! Get the children to safety, especially Master Gerits and Princess Meetia!”

On the viceroy’s knight’s cue, the other guardians all leaped into action.

Despite being a ragtag team, they were all the vassals of major nobles, after all.

“Your Highness, do you hear something?”

“Don’t get distracted, Ryula. Focus on protecting the princess.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

At Ravna’s scolding, the squire Ryula hurriedly looked around.

However, I was intrigued by the squire’s words, so I closed my eyes and listened.

And when I did...

“Ravna! Footsteps! Sir Jelil warned me about this. Plunderers like to cause monster chain rampages and set them on explorers!”

Ravna’s eyes widened. “Get away from the passage!” she shouted.

A few of the knights and guardians managed to react, but the rest were knocked off the cliff by the sudden barrage of bee and grasshopper monsters that burst into the cavern.

“Knight killers?!”

“That’s riiight. Horn hoppers can pierce even the toughest armor, and rock-head bees can crush the hardest helmet. Enjoooy!”

The mages attacked the sneering plunderer, but she was so far away that she dodged them easily.

“Don’t let her distract you! We’ve got to fight these monsters with everything

we've got!"

"Gya-ha-ha! That's right—go on and fight for your lives!"

The woman cackled at the desperately fighting guardians.

Our guardians were all just as strong as my knight Ravna, so they quickly piled up knight killer corpses.

"Better hurry, or you won't be ready for the second helping!"

Next to appear were gigantic praying mantis monsters—seven of them, no less.

"Now it's soldier mantises?!"

"Those who have confidence in their strength, follow me! The rest of you, stay back and defend the children!"

The viceroy's knights led the charge against the mantises.

Ravna stayed back to make sure I was safe, but part of her must have wanted to join the battle: Blood trickled from her tightly clenched fist.

A magic blade glowed red as it sliced through the soldier mantises.

"Spellblade"?

It seemed that the viceroy's knights could use "Spellblade," just like my knight, Ravna.

"Awesome! Good job!"

Sir Gerits and the others cheered on the knights, seeming to forget the current situation.

Under magical protection, the knights continued to slaughter the mantises.

"It's a war mantis!"

I soon learned the dreadful meaning of these shouted words.

In no time at all, the powerful knights were cut down like common soldiers.

The war mantis was so large that the soldier mantises looked like children by comparison.

“We won’t let you pass!”

The viceroy’s knights stood in front of the war mantis.

But after their battle against the soldier mantises, it was clear that exhaustion was starting to take its toll.

“Your Highness...”

Ravna looked at me, her face full of the desire to fight.

“I grant thee permission.”

“Y-Your Highness?!” Ryula the squire exclaimed in surprise.

“Go, Ravna. Show the Shiga Kingdom the strength of a Nolork knight.”

“Understood!”

Drawing her broadsword, Ravna closed in on the war mantis like a gale-force wind.

“Boulder-Slicing Blade!”

Her glowing red sword swung down at the war mantis and clashed against its shield arm.

“If even Ravna’s blade cannot cut it, the monsters of the labyrinth must be impressive indeed.”

Once Ravna joined the fight, the battle was once again going to our advantage.

As I watched, white smoke suddenly rose up from the floor.

“Wh-what’s this?”

“Who used a smoke bomb?!”

“You again, Luram?!”

“I-it wasn’t me!”

Before I could even turn to look at Sir Gerits and the others, my vision was filled with white smoke.

“Ahhh!”

In that instant, I saw Squire Ryula fall to the ground bleeding.

“Ryu—”

But I was unable to finish calling her name before my mouth was covered.

The stench of rotten meat assaulted my nose. Was it Explorer Lurahgiu who was blocking my mouth?

No matter how I struggled, I could not escape, and a rope of some kind was wrapped around my torso.

Phweeeeee.

“What’s that whistling noise?”

“Could be more plunderers. Protect Master Gerits and his friends!”

The shouts of the guardians grew ever more distant.

No.

It was I who was being dragged farther away.

After an impact that knocked the breath from my lungs, I was hefted up like so much baggage.

“Hunh? I came because I ’eard there’d be a princess of some foreign kingdom. Who’s this brat?”

How rude. I raised my head to protest, but as soon as my eyes fell on the face that was half-covered by a mask, I felt fear grip my heart.

I was so frightened that it took me some time to notice that he reeked of rotten meat, just like Lurahgiu.

A whole band of plunderers had appeared alongside the woman who first stood here.

“C-Cap’n. L-lemme have this ’un, please.”

The giant dangling me by a rope stared down at me with a fiery gaze.

“She’d be no use for fertilizing demonic potions. We’ll just kill ’er anyway. Have yer fun.”

The man in the half mask glanced at me coldly and nodded his permission to

the giant.

“Your Highness!”

My knight, Ravna, came running along the cliff.

A single wrong step or a moment’s hesitation would have sent her tumbling right down into the nest of monsters below.

And yet, even stronger than my concern for her safety, I felt relief that she had come to rescue me.

“Oh-ho, I like this one’s spunk.”

“Let go of Her Highness!”

“I’ll take you on, girlie. The name is Ludaman. Plunderer King Ludaman.”

Ravna swung her sword toward the self-proclaimed Plunderer King, but he blocked it with a frightening battle-ax.

“Ye got a strong arm. But with a bronze sword, ye won’t last long against me magic battle-ax.”

Red sparks lit the ledge each time the broadsword and battle-ax clashed.

Their physique seemed roughly the same, but he somehow outclassed her in speed and brute strength.

“No fair, Ludaman. I’m going out there, too.”

“Ye can have the knights, but don’t touch those brats.”

...What’s this?

“I know, I know. Once the viceroy’s guards come, we’ll just curse at them and run, right?”

“Long as ye remember. Make a good show of it for ’em.”

What were they talking about?

It was almost as if...

“Done already, are we?”

“Even if her sword breaks, a knight’s heart never wavers.”

Her sword half-broken, her helmet and shoulder guards in splinters, and blood staining her body, Ravna the knight still stood gallantly against the Plunderer King Ludaman.

Someone, please save Ravna.

Anyone, I beg thee...

“...Please help.”

I whispered what might well be my dying wish.

“Geh-heh-heh, you crying, Princess? Who’s going to save you, huh?”

The giant holding my rope sneered and licked my cheek with his disgusting tongue.

I felt myself shed a single tear at my helplessness and disgrace.

“Who, you ask? Why, a noble band of heroes, of course!”

A young voice echoed through the battlefield of despair.

That voice could only belong to...

Final Battle

Satou here. They say the good you do for others is good you do for yourself. I've certainly seen some people who seem to misunderstand the meaning of that phrase, but I think I've also experienced its true meaning many times. And it applies in a parallel world, too.

"Where's Princess Meetia...? Ah, there you are."

When we arrived in the cylindrical cavern, we found ourselves above the ledge where Princess Meetia and the plunderers stood.

On the ledge, which was about three hundred feet away from us, the stern-faced knight was fighting a giant man with a battle-ax.

The other noble kids and their guardians were on a plateau even farther down, fighting desperately against two war mantises.

As I looked on, I saw the woman plunderer lead her band along the wall to join the fight on the plateau.

"No stairs, huh?"

It looked like there had once been a spiral staircase down along the wall from here, but it had long since collapsed, leaving only some remains.

"Uh-oh, Miss Ravna's sword broke."

Arisa, who I was carrying under one arm, used the Space Magic spells Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to observe the situation.

Setting her down on the floor, I produced some pebbles in my hand, getting ready to join the battle.

Liza and the others should catch up soon, too.

The army would take a little longer to get here, but I'd destroyed any enemies I saw along the way, so they should be fine.

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up a conversation from the cliff.

"Done already, are we?"

"Even if her sword breaks, a knight's heart never wavers."

Ravna really was a gallant knight.

If I wasn't careful, I might even fall for her chivalry.

"I'm going to go help. Arisa, once the others get here, let them know what's going on."

"Okay, got it."

If it came down to it, I could always fall back on "Skyrunning," so I went ahead and used the crumbling ruins of the stairs to run down.

"...Please help."

"Geh-heh-heh, you crying, Princess? Who's going to save you, huh?"

My "Keen Hearing" skill caught Princess Meetia's plea and the plunderer thug mocking her.

"Who, you ask? Why, a noble band of heroes, of course!"

Arisa's shout interrupted the revolting thug's mockery.

She must have used the voice amplification magic tool that was normally reserved for calling out orders.

The people below us all looked up as I came down toward them.

"Some idiot is running down the wall!"

Come on—don't be rude.

The plunderers on the ledge pointed their weapons toward me.

If I had a phobia of pointy objects, the bristling swords and short spears would probably tempt me to turn away.

Instead, I unfurled a preprepared scroll from my breast pocket.

Using the Light Magic spell Illusion to make some convincing magic runes appear in the air, I used my magic menu to fire off the Remote Stun spell with as much moderation as I could.

"A magic scroll?!"

"Ready the Ultramarine Turtle Shield!"

The plunderer underlings shouted at one another, but they couldn't do anything from such a short distance.

Invisible Magic Bullets sent their shields and weapons flying, and the small-fry plunderers started to shriek and collapse to the ground.

“Knight Ravna! I'll back you up!”

As I approached, I drew my fairy sword and called out to the stern knight.

It was fairly dark in here, so I thought she might not be able to see me.



“I’ll crush you, Princess!”

The giant plunderer grabbed Princess Meetia by her small neck.

You really think I’d let you do that?

Taking advantage of his large size, I used “Warp” to teleport myself right behind him.

Before he could even react to my sudden disappearance, I lashed out with my fairy sword.

Slashing through his wrist tendon, I kicked the plunderer in the stomach, sending him flying into the Plunderer King Ludaman before he could deliver a finishing blow to the knight.

Using an umbrella of Magic Hand to catch the blood, I put it into my Trash folder in Storage and caught the released Princess Meetia.

“M-my hand!”

“Out of the way!”

Ludaman cursed and booted the giant plunderer out of the way.

As the giant stumbled, the remains of Ravna’s sword jabbed through his forehead.

Yikes, no mercy... Can’t you keep the gore to a minimum, please?

Sensing that the Plunderer King was ready for any attack she might make, the knight backstepped over to me instead.

“Thank you for your assistance.”

“Don’t worry about it. Use this to recover, please.”

I handed a small pouch of magic potions to the chivalrous knight.

“Tch, ye must be crazy to come down the wall like that.”

I shrugged at Ludaman. “It was the only option I had to save my friends.”

The plunderers I’d knocked out with a reduced version of Remote Stun started to pull themselves up from the ground.

On top of that, my radar showed several dozen more plunderers on their way to this ledge.

Not that they were any threat to us.

“Hmph. Think yerself a hero, do ye, brat?”

“You don’t have to be a hero to rescue your friends from a bad guy.”

I would leave things like that to Hayato the Hero.

If I could rescue the people I knew, that was good enough for me.

I’d never turn my back on someone dying before my eyes, but I didn’t make a habit of deliberately seeking out people who were in trouble and saving them.

“I’m ready, Sir Pendragon. That man is strong. We’ll have to work together if we hope to defeat him.”

“Ye really plan to fight with that broken sword?”

The Plunderer King sneered.

Oh right, Knight Ravna’s sword was broken.

I produced a Magic Sword from Storage by way of my Garage Bag.

It was the Flame Sword I made with the help of Arisa and Mia before.

I’d made some others during this round of labyrinth exploration, but I obviously couldn’t break out a handmade orichalcum Holy Sword in front of all these people.

“Please use this, if you like. I apologize that it’s not a broadsword.”

“Is this a Magic Sword...? What a remarkable blade. Victory will surely be ours with this.”

Ravna produced fire and “Spellblade” around the magic blade.

“Oh-ho? That’d fetch a pretty price, eh?”

Ludaman licked his lips.

“With evenly matched weapons, I shan’t fall to the likes of you.”

“We’ll see about that, now, won’t we?”

The plunderer produced some pills from his bosom and crunched them down.

My AR display showed them as a pill version of demonic potion.

“Aye, the power’s coursing through me.”

Plunderer King Ludaman’s status condition changed to **Demonic Potion: Overdosed**.

Across the surface of his body, red magic runes formed like rope and disappeared.

“Right now, I’m the strongest man aliiiiive!”

The dark light of magic still enveloping his body, the Plunderer King roared and charged toward us.

Ravna blocked the battle-ax as it swung down at her.

Red light and flames danced between the two.

The ground below the knight’s feet started to give way, like an effect from an action manga.

Cracks ran through the ledge.

At this rate, wouldn’t this whole cliff break soon?

Then I saw a change on my radar.

“You’re wide open, kid.”

A scantily clad plunderer jumped at me from behind with a curved blade.

Then there was a light *pop*, and the female plunderer was sent flying as if she’d taken an invisible punch.

“Thank you, Lulu!”

Lulu had sniped down my would-be attacker before I needed to counterattack.

“Tch, got a mage on yer side, do ye?”

As the rest of my group arrived at the top of the cliff, Ludaman looked up at them and cursed.

“We’re coming, master!”

“Here we gooo?”

“Let’s do it, sir!”

The beastfolk girls scabbled down the sparse footholds on the wall.

Hey, that’s dangerous! What if you fall?!

I quickly prepared my Magic Hand, then anxiously watched until the girls touched down safely.

“Magic Swords and a Magic Spear, too! Those weapons are as good as ours, lassie!”

The plunderers, who’d been playing dead, jumped up to attack the beastfolk girls.

Like Ludaman, they had taken demonic potions and were glowing with red magic circles.

“If you dare stand before my master’s Magic Spear, prepare to give up everything but your life!”

Leaving a trail of red light behind her, Liza charged into the midst of the drug-enhanced plunderers.

“Achilles’ heel?”

With “Spellblade” on both her Magic Swords, Tama stayed low to the ground and darted about, cutting at the plunderers’ Achilles tendons.

“Tch, you think you can beat us?!”

A plunderer with a giant Ultramarine Turtle Shield stood in Pochi’s way.

“Take this, sir!”

Pochi used a foothold in midair to accelerate upward, leaping right over the shield in front of her.

“Double jump, sir!”

She must have acquired a skill that was an earlier form of “Skyrunning.”

From the look of things, it was safe to leave Liza and the others to take care of

the small-fry plunderers.

“Sir Satou! Ravna needs help!”

From behind me, Princess Meetia pointed at her valiant knight.

Oops, that was close.

I caught the knight as the Plunderer King sent her flying toward me.

“I’ll slice both of ye in two!”

Aglow with red light, the battle-ax plunged toward us.

“Master!” Arisa’s desperate shriek echoed across the battlefield.

“Die!”

As Plunderer King Ludaman’s shout faded, a spray of red blood flew through the air, and the cliff was bathed in red light.

“Guess that’s a win for the power of teamwork?”

My fairy blade had blocked the battle-ax’s strike, while the knight’s Magic Sword slashed through his flank.

Quickly, Ludaman leaped back.

I wanted to chase him down, but I couldn’t abandon the knight when her legs had been severely injured, so I had to let the chance slide.

Just then, our reinforcements reached the noble children down below.

“It is I, Acting Viscount Sokell Bonam! Surrender, villainous plunderers!”

For some reason, Sokell was leading the troops.

If he was here in charge of these guards, then maybe the note I slipped into the guildmaster’s office about his demonic potion production scheme hadn’t come in handy just yet?

“They’ve got reinforcements already? Let’s get outta here, men.”

““Yes’m!””

After making a loud, monotone declaration like a bad actress, the dagger-wielding plunderer led her men up the wall to flee.

“Lord Sokell, war mantises!”

“Urgh! Kill them, quickly!”

“W-we can’t!”

Far from chasing after the escaping plunderers, Sokell started causing a panic about the war mantises that the nobles’ guardians were fighting.

Ah, if you run that way, you’ll put the noble kids in danger.

I spotted the chubby third son of the viceroy fleeing with a young girl.

Sokell was one thing, but I couldn’t let the noble kids or soldiers who were just doing their jobs get eaten.

A war mantis lunged at the viceroy’s son, so I flicked a pebble from Storage at it.

Without even arcing in the air, the pebble simply crushed right through the mantis’s compound eyes and drilled into the wall behind it.

KWAWWWMMMAAAA.

Letting out a shriek, the war mantis jumped off the cliff and fled as fast as its legs would carry it.

It wasn’t exactly the effect I was going for, but it did what I needed it to do, so we’d call it a win.

“Tch, guess it’s time— Retreat, boys.”

The Plunderer King Ludaman and his underlings threw down smoke bombs, covering the ledge with smoke.

You really think I’ll let you get away?

I used the onyx ring on my finger to produce an obsidian-like spear.

I’d only tossed it at him, but it broke the Plunderer King’s arm, pinning him to a wall.

“Gaaah! What’s this spear?! I can’t budge it!”

Battle-ax or no, there was no way you could break that thing from such an unnatural angle.

It was a magic object, after all. Since I poured plenty of magic into it, of course it produced a spear harder than steel.

“We’re leaving, Ludaman.”

“Hang in there, Cap’n Ludaman.”

The Plunderer King’s two top brass were quick to abandon their leader and flee under cover of the smoke bombs. Just the kind of heartless behavior you’d expect from a criminal bunch.

“D-damn you, you stubborn scale girl!”

“A hairy fellow like yourself has no right to look down upon the orangescale tribe.”

The scythe-wielding plunderer who was fighting Liza couldn’t seem to escape.

“Zooooom?”

“Don’t swing that, sir!”

As soon as Tama and Pochi joined the fight, the scale quickly tipped in the beastfolk girls’ favor.

According to the AR I could see through the smoke, the other small-fry plunderers had already been taken down by the beastfolk girls.

“Graaaah!”

Through the smoke, I dimly saw Plunderer King Ludaman swing his battle-ax, still pinned against the wall.

Oh, ew.

“Aaaargh!”

Blood flew everywhere as he howled like an animal.

Instead of the stone spear, Ludaman had aimed for his own arm that was pinned to the wall.

“You’d go that far just to get away...?”

While I stared in disbelief, the Plunderer King started to flee through the smoke.

Come on. I told you you're not getting away.

I pulled out the scroll again to use the crowd-suppressing Short Stun spell.

Princess Meetia and her knight were nearby, but in the smoke, they probably wouldn't notice anything unusual.

Confirming on the map that the plunderers in the smoke were now in the **Fainted** condition, I put away the scroll.

I'd rounded them all up in one fell swoop, even the ones who had already fled.

"Liza, when you're done tying those guys up, get the unconscious ones in the passages there, too, please."

Leaving the beastfolk girls to take care of the rest, I turned to heal the knight's legs.

"This is worse than I thought."

Both of the knight's kneecaps had been shattered along with her armor.

"What, this? Pour a little alcohol over it and it'll be good as new."

No, I don't think so.

Surely the knight knew that, too.

"Then allow me to do a little first aid for now."

"Sorry to make more work for you."

Pouring some distilled liquor over the wounds under the pretense of sterilizing them, I used the Practical Magic spell See Through to look at the broken bones, taking note of all the armor fragments and cloth fibers that had gotten inside and delicately removing them with Magic Hand.

Finally, I had her take an intermediate healing potion, and the job was done.

"Sir Pendragon, I truly appreciate your help and healing."

"I only did what anyone would do."

Smiling at the knight, I called Arisa and the others over from the passage with Telephone.

“Sir Satou, I thank thee, truly!”

“You did well, too, Princess Meetia.”

Princess Meetia threw her arms around me in gratitude. I patted her head as I waited for the others to arrive.

The noble kids and their guards down below were still fighting the remaining war mantis, but it looked like they would be able to win just fine without me, so I let them be.

“Master, we’ve finished apprehending the plunderers.”

“Thank you, Liza.”

Behind Liza lay the forms of the plunderers, tied up with sturdy rope.

Tama and Pochi were striking a victory pose in front of them.

Their sparkling eyes were practically begging me to praise them, so I patted their heads and said, “Good work, you two.”

Pochi’s tail wagged happily, and Tama rubbed her head against my hand just like a real cat.

Since I’d already praised them now, I would have to wait to scold them for their dangerous actions until after we got back to the house.



“Guards! Arrest Pendragon!”

Once I’d rejoined my group and was bringing Princess Meetia and company down to the noble kids and their guards, Sokell started shouting some nonsense again.

Even the guards looked flummoxed by his orders.

The noble kids were all exhausted, so most of them didn’t even look our way.

“Sir Sokell! What art thou on about all of a sudden?!”

Surprisingly, the only person to direct their anger right at Sokell was the tough young Princess Meetia.

I signaled to Arisa and the others not to get involved in the argument.

“Princess Meetia, Pendragon is the man behind this plunderer attack.”

“And what is thy proof?!”

“This man told us everything.”

Sokell jerked his chin toward his men, and an explorer appeared from behind the soldiers, tossing a man’s corpse at our feet.

Come on—can’t you treat the dead with a little more respect?

“Th-this man is the guide thou sent, is he not?!”

“No, not quite.” Sokell shook his head. “The guide I hired is this man.”

He pointed at the man who’d just tossed the corpse toward us.

“Then who is this dead man?!”

“A subordinate of Pendragon’s.”

All eyes turned to me at Sokell’s words.

“No, I’ve never seen this man in my life.”

According to the posthumous information in the AR display, he was an explorer who’d belonged to a criminal organization.

“Enough feigning ignorance! He confessed to everything before he died.”

Sokell sneered down at me sadistically.

He didn’t kill this man just to frame me, did he?

“Yeah, I dunno about that...”

“What?! Who was that?!”

Sokell whirled around in a rage at the voice that came from behind him.

“If that’s true, then what was Sir Pendragon’s motivation for putting the princess and the other children in danger? And why would he save them himself?”

“It’s obvious! He wanted to make a show of rescuing Master Gerits so that the viceroy and his wife would be indebted to him!” Sokell bellowed.

“I see. So the plunderers were all part of the plan.”

“Of course! There’s no other explanation.”

Sokell nodded in satisfaction.

It was as if he was explaining his own plan.

“Then I can say with confidence that that’s impossible.”

The speaker revealed himself from behind Liza and Nana.

“Sir Pendragon was with us. The fact that he made it there in time was nothing more than a coincidence.”

“You’re just one of his allies!”

“I am Captain Zeorun of the labyrinth army! And I swear on the name of the Ancestral King Yamato and the labyrinth army that we would never work with plunderers!”

“Wh-why would the labyrinth army be with Pendragon...? Is this General Erthal’s doing?!”

Sokell drew back in alarm.

“It *is* strange, isn’t it...?”

Arisa’s voice rang out through the silence.

“How did you know where this place was anyway, Acting Viceroy Sokell?”

Arisa spoke in the tone of a cat cornering a mouse.

“Hmph, I simply followed the signal from the gold badge, of course!”

Sokell gestured dramatically, as if trying to shake off the doubts being cast on him.

The explorer standing next to him looked at him with evident discomfort.

“Ohhh, is that so?”

Arisa snickered.

“What’s so funny, you little tart?! You dare mock me?!”

“Objection!”

Arisa struck a pose and pointed at Sokell.

“Any explorer worth their salt knows that a signal from a gold badge is only sent out a few times a day. Even if you did pick up that signal, there’s no way you could have gotten here this quickly!” Arisa declared triumphantly.

Now that she mentioned it, the east guild clerk did say something about that when we registered.

I was impressed that Arisa remembered it.

“The only way you could have found this place is if you happened to be passing nearby like we were or if you knew a crime would take place here from the very beginning!”

Sokell growled at Arisa’s words.

“That’s right! The plunderer woman who captured me said as much! ‘Once the viceroy’s guards come, we’ll just curse at them and run,’ she said! Guards rarely enter the labyrinth, yet the plunderers knew they would come here!”

Wow, Sokell was even worse than I thought.

“P-Princess Meetia, did my proposal offend you so that you feel you must now lie to harm my honor?! And yet, my love still lies forever with you!”

There wasn’t a single speck of this so-called love in Sokell’s eyes.

I doubted anybody would fall for an act like this.

“That’s enough.”

The viceroy’s guardian knight, who’d been listening in silence, stepped between Sokell and me.

This man was from a count’s family, just like Sokell.

“Sir Sokell, if you are innocent, swear on the name of the ancestral king and your family. Black-haired noble, I ask the same of you.”

His face was somewhat callous-looking, but he seemed fairly reasonable.

“I swear my innocence on the name of Ancestral King Yamato and the Pendragon family name.”

Sokell was still silent, so I spoke up first.

“And Sir Sokell?”

“I swear that I never intended to harm Master Gerits, on the name of Ancestral King Yamato and the family name of Count Bonam.”

Oh?

So it wasn't just my imagination—his target wasn't Princess Meetia.

That seemed strange, since I'd been hearing about his repeated proposals to her.

This made it seem all the more likely that he was the one who'd sent those black-clad thugs after Meetia.

“Very well. Then I declare you both innocent as of now. If anyone has an objection, they may submit it in writing to the viceroy.”

With that, the viceroy's knight declared the matter settled.

Still, this was the second time Sokell had tried to accuse me of something...

Maybe instead of anonymous letters and such about Sokell's demonic potion trade, I should take things into my own hands?

I checked the map.

Yep, tomorrow looks like the perfect opportunity.

On our way home, I killed time by writing out a plan to neutralize Sokell in my memo pad.



“Whew, I'm beat...”

“No kidding.”

Returning to our house in Labyrinth City, we drank tea that our head maid, Miss Miteruna, made for us.

Transporting the noble kids and the plunderers took more time than expected, so it was late in the night by the hour we returned.

Our capture of the Plunderer King Ludaman caused more of a fuss than I expected, but since we were all so tired, I arranged to return to the explorers'

guild another day for the investigation and such.

Since plunderers were criminals in the labyrinth, they fell under the authority of the explorers' guild.

"Sleepyyy?"

"Yaaawn, sir."

Tama and Pochi stretched out in my lap like cats.

The other kids were so exhausted that they were passing out on the sofa.

"Let's sleep for now. We can take baths and eat in the morning."

"Mm-hmm..."

Arisa looked beat, too.

She'd worked especially hard today, so I carried her to the bed princess-style, then did the same for each of the other girls.

Finally, once I'd laid Nana down, I threw myself into the last empty space on our extra-large bed.

"Morniiiing?"

"Breakfast, sir!"

Tama and Pochi hopped on me the next morning, waking me from a deep, dreamless sleep.

I'd been up for only one night, but the false accusations from Sokell must have left me mentally drained.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Aye!"

"Pochi's a good girl who sleeps well and eats well, sir!"

The pair struck a pose, and I patted their heads before we held hands and walked to the dining room.

"I tried to make a Japanese-style breakfast today, so there's soy-boiled monster pumpkin and hopping potatoes, grilled eyeless fish, and cold tofu."

We'd only just returned from our labyrinth exploration, yet Lulu had made us a very involved breakfast.

"...Cold tofu?"

"Yes, I heard that there was a shop in Labyrinth City that made tofu, so I asked Miss Miteruna to stock up for us."

"There's even minced ginger and green onions."

"Mm, yummy."

Dunking the tofu in soy sauce, Arisa opened her mouth wide and took a big, satisfied bite.

Then she followed that with a big helping of piping hot rice and chewed away happily.

"Sausaaage?"

"Mr. Thick-Cut Bacon is delicious, too, sir."

"They're both very good."

Lulu had even prepared a meat option for the beastfolk girls.

After this peaceful breakfast, I was handed a troublesome letter from Miss Miteruna.

"What is it?"

"A summons from the viceroy."

Removing the seal with a letter knife, I skimmed the contents.

"He wants to invite me to a luncheon as thanks for rescuing his third son, Gerits."

Not only that, but it was to take place that very day.

In fact, I barely had two hours.

Considering nobles' usual etiquette, this was a pretty urgent summons.

I was a bit concerned about this speed, but the viceroy and his wife were said to be doting parents, so I doubted they would treat me poorly after I saved their child's life.

Curious about Sokell's current whereabouts, I checked the map and found that he was at the viceroy's office with the noble in green.

Shoot. Did he beat me to the punch while I was sleeping?

Cursing silently, I checked on the status of the demonic potion stash in Sokell's basement.

That was still there, but I also saw that some explorers' guild scouts and labyrinth army intelligence operatives were investigating Sokell's basement.

There were people dispatched at the underground passage and its exit, too.

They must have let him go free so that they could investigate his home and catch him red-handed.

As long as major players like the noble in green, Baronet Dyukeli, and maybe even the viceroy himself weren't backing him, as I'd heard at Viscount Siemmen's party, it was only a matter of time before Sokell fell.

However, I was concerned about why Sokell would be with the noble in green and the viceroy and his wife at a time like this.

I would've liked to find out what they were discussing by using Clairvoyance and Clairaudience, but it'd be risky to try to spy on the viceroy's office that was protected by the City Core, and the intelligence expert Poputema would surely notice any Space Magic.

I didn't want to poke the hornet's nest, so I decided not to try to get information that way.

Hmm?

As I scrolled back through the map, I happened to spot a carriage traveling toward Labyrinth City that was surrounded by dozens of thieves and criminal guild members.

"I have to take care of something."

With that, I sped into the study and used Return to teleport to the Ivy Manor.

"D-don't startle me, whelp! Erm, sir."

"Sorry, sorry."

I apologized to Lelillil as she toppled over in surprise, then ran out into the garden.

Manipulating the map, I fired the maximum amount of Remote Stun shots. Three rounds, just in case.

After a moment, all the criminals' status conditions changed to **Fainted**, so I teleported to the secret basement of the mansion with Return.

"What in the world was that about?"

"Oh, I was just rescuing a carriage that was being attacked by thieves."

"Honestly, you're so overpowered." Arisa rolled her eyes but didn't question any further.

Now, I didn't want to just show up at the viceroy's luncheon empty-handed.

I didn't have much time, but I decided to prepare a little parlor trick for them.

After all, what was a party without some surprises?



"Sir Pendragon, the viceroy and his wife await you. Right this way."

The letter had definitely said "luncheon," but the receptionist guided me to a parlor with no windows.

There was the viceroy and his wife, along with their guardian knights. In the Shiga Kingdom, important people normally entered the room after you, so this felt a little unusual.

Sokell and the noble in green weren't here; my map said they were on standby in another room.

At least they weren't planning on throwing me into jail, no questions asked.

"Welcome, Sir Pendragon."

The viceroy's wife was a plump middle-aged woman who bore a strong resemblance to their third son, Gerits.

She had probably been more cute than beautiful when she was younger.

The viceroy himself was a portly man, too, but his face bore a resemblance to

his second son, Rayleigh.

“I’m told you rescued our little Gerits from danger yesterday. We can’t thank you enough.”

Without much in the way of introductions, the viceroy’s wife cut to the chase.

Most nobles tended to beat around the bush, but the viceroy’s wife seemed much more proactive, since she had been quick to invite me and to break the ice.

“And my butler tells me that you sent us plenty of expensive presents, too.”

Huh?

I had sent them presents, but I’d also rescued another son of theirs, Rayleigh, in addition to Gerits.

Were they planning on thanking me separately for that?

“I hope my humble gifts were to your liking, then—”

“So first you present us with all those gifts, and then you save Gerits? What do you intend to butter us up for, I wonder?”

The viceroy’s wife interrupted me in an almost accusatory tone.

Butter up?

Did she think I was trying to bribe them in exchange for a governmental position or something?

I thought I was just keeping up the same practices as the noble tea parties in the old capital, but maybe I should’ve researched local traditions more before I chose my gifts.

But I hadn’t had time to go ask the nobles Viscount Siemmen introduced me to for advice.

Oh, I know!

“Well, if I could make one request...”

“A request?”

The viceroy’s wife smiled at me patiently.

What was scary, though, was that her eyes weren't smiling.

I had to choose my words carefully here.

"...Might I be able to ask you to reinstate the public orphanage?"

"Orphanage?"

"Yes, if possible. If a public orphanage is too much to ask, I would be more than grateful if you could offer me permission to build a private orphanage and provide food for the homeless and needy."

At that, the viceroy's wife's smile widened.

What's going on here? For some reason, she looked like a predator licking its chops.

"My, my, my. For such a young fellow, you certainly are compassionate toward the less fortunate."

The viceroy's wife rang a bell on the table.

Promptly, a maid led the noble in green and Sokell in from the other room.

Now what?

I had no idea what she intended to accomplish by bringing these two into the room now.

"Listen to this, Sir Poputema. Sir Pendragon wishes to provide an orphanage and food for homeless young children. Brings to mind the stories of the Cannibal Snakes, does it not?"

"Yes, quite wonderful, indeed."

The Cannibal Snakes seemed like a terribly ill-suited name for a philanthropic organization.

I also felt like I'd heard that name somewhere before.

Where was it again?

"Will you permit it, indeed?"

"Yes, of course. Rayleigh told us all about him in his letter, after all."

Ah, they finally mentioned Rayleigh's name.

I'd been a little worried that the noble in green had forgotten to give it to them, but I guess I worried for nothing.

I didn't know what exactly Rayleigh had written, but judging by the viceroy's wife's tone, he had at least mentioned that I saved his life.

"He said that Sir Pendragon's wishes are his wishes, so we should fulfill them at any cost."

Wow, Rayleigh. That's a bit excessive, don't you think?

"And that if he wishes to wed our third daughter, Gohna, or our fourth daughter, Shina, we should welcome him into our family."

Hmm? Would he have written something like that?

When we had a party in a Lalagi bar to celebrate the founding of the Dragonpen Trading Company, I distinctly remembered telling him about all my difficulties turning down marriage proposals in the old capital...

"He also wrote that if he wants power, we should make him the acting viceroy, and if he wants fame, we should recommend him as a son-in-law to a prestigious noble family."

"Damn you, Pendragon!"

Sokell turned pale and seethed at me, but the viceroy's wife silenced him with a glare.

He was probably angry because if I was made acting viceroy, Sokell would be demoted.

Still, I thought I remembered telling Rayleigh that I had no such ambitions.

"Did Mr. Rayleigh really write that?"

It didn't sound like him at all.

Even the viceroy looked surprised as he sat next to his wife, as if he was hearing this for the first time.

"Yes, he certainly did. It's his handwriting, without a doubt. Such neat, precise, beautiful letters, which truly reflect his personality."

The viceroy's wife stroked the letter lovingly.

Seriously, what?

She was acting as if she was talking about someone deceased.

“Listen to this, Sir Pendragon. This is the last thing he wrote.”

The viceroy’s wife read aloud, her eyes trailing across the paper.

“As I write this, I am looking up at the crescent moon in the night sky. Dearest Mother and Father, I hope that you receive the moon’s divine protection...”

When she looked up from the letter, tears were rolling down the viceroy’s wife’s cheeks.

I’m sorry?

“I see. Still playing dumb.”

The smile faded from her face, and she glared at me seriously.

Huh? Why do I get the feeling things aren’t looking good for me?

“Surely any noble of the Shiga Kingdom would notice the strangeness of citing an ominous crescent moon and the deathly symbol of moonlight in one’s closing words.”

Um, no, I have no idea.

Thinking back, I did remember reading lines like “evil’s power is strongest under a crescent moon” and “the moon in the far end of the sky chases away evil” in some mythological picture books.

“But in the Ashinen family, they have a different meaning.”

“What might that be?”

I think I can make an educated guess, but...

“‘The moon’s divine protection’ is a code phrase that means someone is being forced to write a letter.”

Wow. I guess nobles have a lot of enemies.

Should she really be talking about this in front of Sokell and me at all, though?

“And the ‘crescent moon’...”

The viceroy's wife's voice was choked with tears.

“‘The crescent moon in the night sky’ means that the writer is about to be murdered. We only use that phrase for such an occasion. You understand now, don't you?”

The viceroy's wife glared at me, tears still flowing down her cheeks.

If looks could kill, that sheer hatred would have me dead on the floor.

...Uh-oh.

Clearly, someone had falsified this letter and was framing me for Rayleigh's murder.

“Madam—”

“Sir Sokell, you should make your claim now, too, indeed.”

As I opened my mouth to explain the misunderstanding, the noble in green interrupted me with a smirk.

“R-right!”

What's he going to accuse me of this time?

“Sir Pendragon has a secret relationship with Princess Meetia.”

It's not polite to accuse someone of being a lolicon, especially when you're obviously one yourself.

“He's been manipulating Princess Meetia from the shadows, holding Lady Shina as a hostage, since she requires Breath of Purification, all in order to make himself necessary to you, Madam.”

No, that was what Sokell was doing with the ogredrink potion.

“And he's been spreading demonic potions throughout the city, even using them as payment to manipulate plunderers to put young Master Gerits in danger. He must have then rescued him in the hopes of gaining your trust and favor, Madam.”

Wasn't that also Sokell's own plan?

Oh, I see.

He was hoping to pile all his own crimes on my name, in addition to the murder of Rayleigh.

I didn't know whether it was Sokell or the noble in green who had come up with this plan, but if I didn't speak up, I'd likely be imprisoned and found guilty without a trial.

Not a single person in this room would support me.

Even putting aside the inappropriate smirk from the noble in green, the viceroy and his wife were glaring at me under the misapprehension that I was an enemy of their sons, and the guards had their hands on their swords as if they were ready to murder me at any minute.

And then there was Sokell, assured of his own victory, sneering down at me with a twisted smile.

Truly, I was over a barrel.

Surrounded by enemies on all sides.

Yet, I had only one thought.

Checkmate, Sokell.

I was about to turn the tables on him completely.

"Do you have anything to say in your defense, Sir Pendragon?"

The viceroy's wife trembled with rage.

Another thirty seconds or so should do it, right?

"Yes, I believe so. Is it all right if I make two points?"

Timing was very important here.

"If you must, indeed."

"Firstly, Sir Sokell, your accusations are all actually your own misdeeds, correct?"

"What was that?! You dare mock me?!"

Sokell practically foamed at the mouth, but I ignored him and gazed at the viceroy and his wife.

Five more seconds.

“And secondly...”

The door flew open without even a knock.

I held my hand out toward the door as I finished my statement.

“...Sir Rayleigh is alive, as you can see.”

All eyes in the room turned toward the person coming in through the door.

Sokell, especially, was so shocked, his jaw nearly hit the floor.

Still, I thought it took a special sort of stupidity for him to actually mutter things like “impossible!” and “but he should be dead!” out loud.

“Mother, Father, good to see you! Your prodigal son, Rayleigh, has retur—
Hmm? Why are you all looking at me like that?”

The cheerful smile on Rayleigh’s face gradually faded into a look of bewilderment.

“Oh, if it isn’t Sir Pendragon! I’ll have to show you the ledgers from the Dragonpen Trading Company later. You won’t believe your eyes!”

Noticing me, Rayleigh started chatting like an old friend.

“R-Rayleigh!”

“Huh? Father? Mother? Wow, I’m touched that you’re so happy to see me again.”

The viceroy and his wife joyously threw their arms around Rayleigh, who seemed bemused but happy.

I picked up the letter the viceroy’s wife had dropped and took a look.

I knew it.

My maxed-out “Counterfeit” skill told me right away that this letter was a fake.

“Sir Rayleigh, did you write this letter?”

“Hmm? That does look like my handwriting, but... Goodness, what is this? If this is someone’s idea of a joke, it’s not funny at all. Why, this conclusion makes

it sound like I died. It's as if someone was trying to set Sir Pendragon up in a trap."

The viceroy's wife looked at her indignant son.

"What did you actually write?"

"Well, to sum it up, that Sir Pendragon saved me when I was adrift at sea, that he invested capital for me to start a trading company, and that he brought great fortune to the Ashinen family, so you should be sure to treat him kindly. I think that was about it?"

Yes, that sounded a lot more accurate.

As the viceroy's wife listened to her son, she sank deep into thought.

"Ah yes, I believe Sokell has a vassal in his house who excels at forgery, indeed," the noble in green observed quietly.

"L-Lord Poputema, I told you that in confidence!" Sokell hissed, which didn't exactly help his case.

A polite knock at the door interrupted, and a maid poked her head in to address the noble in green.

"Lord Poputema, your retainer is here."

Shaking off Sokell as he tried to cling to him, Poputema walked over to the door, where a man in slightly dirty clothes whispered in his ear.

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up the whole conversation, of course.

It seemed a roundup of all of Sokell's men and the criminal guilds had begun.

This little insurance run was the surprise I'd set up before I left.

"Madam, a word?"

The viceroy's wife looked a bit irritated to have her reunion interrupted, but she silently listened as the noble in green whispered to her, telling her about the roundup in question.



“Sokell. Thank you for your service until now.”

“Wha—? Lady Reythel, please wait! It was not I who forged that letter! Someone is trying to frame me!”

Sokell desperately pressed closer to the cold viceroy’s wife.

“Did I give you permission to call me by my name?”

“I-I’m terribly sorry, Madam...”

Sokell bobbed his head apologetically.

“Oh, that’s right, Mother. The area around Labyrinth City’s gotten rather unsafe these days, hasn’t it?”

For some reason, Rayleigh chose this moment to tell his mother about the attack that had happened earlier.

“Your carriage was attacked by a band of thieves?”

“Mm-hmm. We were rescued by some unseen mage, but still.”

The viceroy’s wife turned her gaze toward the noble in green.

“My subordinate relayed information about this to me earlier, indeed. One of the thieves who attacked Sir Rayleigh’s carriage was a former steward of Sokell, indeed.”

No, he definitely didn’t say anything like that.

“Unfortunately, the man in question was killed, so we were unable to question him, indeed.”

Nobody died in the attack on Rayleigh, though.

None of what the noble in green was saying made sense, but considering how Sokell had muttered “he should be dead” when he saw Rayleigh, it wasn’t necessarily hard to believe.

As far as I knew, Sokell was the only person in Labyrinth City who would stand to gain anything from attacking Rayleigh.

“Then it seems that what Princess Meetia said about the incident in the labyrinth was true, too.”

The viceroy's wife's expression was emotionless as she spoke.

Princess Meetia must have gone to her right after she got back to tell her that I was innocent.

For a young girl, she had a strong sense of duty.

"N-no, I really did follow the gold badge's signal to rescue them!"

Sokell's desperate plea fell on deaf ears.

"Sokell, you may reflect on your actions in the northern spire."

"B-but, Madam...!"

"You had best put your affairs in order before the analyst from the royal capital's judicial police arrive. I will send a letter to your parents as well. Let us pray that self-serving Count Bonam chooses you over his house's best interests."

"I—I—I..."

Looking as if he'd received a death sentence, Sokell fell to his hands and knees in the "orz" pose, as seen in ASCII art online.

"It's all because of him, damn him..."

His brow against the floor, Sokell chewed his fingertips and muttered darkly.

In his case, I felt he was getting his just deserts.

A clear ringing echoed through the room.

Summoned by the viceroy's wife's bell, two servants grabbed Sokell by the arms and lifted him to his feet.

As they did, I made eye contact with him and saw his deep resentment.

"It's all your fault!"

Shaking off the servants, Sokell strangely managed to move quickly enough to grab his short sword and lunge forward.

The tip of the blade was coated in a dark liquid, undoubtedly some kind of poison.

"Rayleigh!"

The viceroy's wife screamed.

For some reason, Sokell had pointed his blade at Rayleigh, not me.

The guardian knights tried to move, but they wouldn't make it around the viceroy in time.

Not a chance.

I produced a nut from storage and flicked it with my finger, sending Sokell's short sword flying into the air.

Sokell still tried to claw at Rayleigh, but I stopped him with a restrained kick that still sent him crashing into the wall.

According to my AR display, his unusual burst of strength and speed was from a demonic potion.

He must have taken it while he was pretending to chew his fingers.

"Thank you, Sir Pendragon."

"Not at all. I'm glad you're all right."

Rayleigh rubbed his arm sheepishly.

Now bound in ropes, Sokell was dragged out of the room.

"Y-you've got it all wrong! I was just trying to murder that blasted Pendragon — I must bring about more chaos, more evil— N-no, I'm innocent!"

Sokell shouted incoherently.

Hmm. Maybe demonic potions had a side effect of derangement?

As he was dragged a bit roughly down the hallway, Sokell continued to scream nonsense until he was out of earshot.

He probably deserved it, but it was still a pitiable end.

"Perhaps someone was controlling Sir Sokell with Psychic Magic, indeed."

"Psychic Magic? That accursed black art?"

The viceroy's wife furrowed her brow.

So Psychic Magic really was a hated art.

I tried searching on the map, but I didn't see any Psychic Magic users in Labyrinth City.

"We shall investigate this and the corpse potions Sir Sokell's friends were using, indeed."

"Yes, please do."

With an exaggerated bow to the viceroy and his wife, the noble in green left the room.

I was a little curious about Sokell's strange behavior in the end and the apparent attempts by the noble in green to entrap him, but if I looked into the matter too deeply, I'd probably only get caught up in even more trouble.

A wise man lets sleeping dogs lie, as they say.

Epilogue

Satou here. Sometimes when nothing seems to go your way, you'll struggle with all your might, until finally you'll find that everything just falls into place like dominoes. But that's not just luck—it's all the experience you built up while you were struggling.

"My, Sir Pendragon is actually a friend of yours, Rayleigh?"

"Well, sure. He saved my life, and he's the investor and co-owner of my company, the Dragonpen Trading Company."

After the viceroy's wife apologized to me for the incident, we moved from the official parlor to a private living room.

Now that the misunderstanding had been resolved, the viceroy's wife was so nice, she was like a completely different person.

"Madam, we've brought the gifts from Sir Pendragon."

While we were chatting, a steward brought in my gifts on a pedestal.

Aside from the same light stone accessories I'd given out in the old capital, they were mostly goods I'd acquired on the sugar route.

Spotting the conspicuous sculpture of a young man on the pedestal, the viceroy uttered a breathy "Ooh!"

Remaining composed, his wife quickly started talking to cover his behavior.

"These are all quite valuable in the Shiga Kingdom, especially this sculpture here..."

However, with his geekdom unleashed, the viceroy couldn't seem to stop himself.

"This is a masterpiece by Garudoira of the Flue Empire—from his fabled later period, no less! His apprentices could never evoke such liveliness! It's undoubtedly by the hand of the master himself, and unquestionably—"

"...Dear."

The viceroy's wife stopped his fervent ranting about the artwork with a quiet

word.

I'd just picked it out at random, so I was glad it turned out to be a piece that pleased the enthusiastic viceroy.

At any rate, this was an impressive room.

The opposite wall was largely made of glass panes, rare in Labyrinth City, that looked out onto a flourishing garden, and glass decorations throughout the room reflected the light beautifully.

Unlike the first room, where we hadn't even had tea, this time we were brought delicious blue-green tea and delicate tea cakes.

The honey candies made by the chef were as beautiful as jewels, but they were a little too sweet for me.

"Wow, what unusual pastries."

"So they're called *castellas*, are they? Absolutely delightful."

Rayleigh and his mother were thrilled by the sponge cakes I'd brought.

"Rayleigh, you said that Sir Pendragon is the co-owner of your company? Whatever do you mean?"

Once she'd finished her cakes, the viceroy's wife returned to the subject we'd been discussing when we first entered the room.

"It's just as I say. If it weren't for him, I never would have thought to start a company like this."

"All I did was provide Lord Rayleigh with some capital and ships."

I didn't want him to talk me up too much, so I simply provided the truth.

Now, the viceroy didn't seem interested in the tea and cakes and was too busy deciding how to display his new sculpture to join in on the conversation.

"Oh, don't be modest. Even an esteemed noble of the royal capital wouldn't be able to provide three ships all on their own."

Well, I just happened across those ships unmanned on the ocean, so...

"Besides, without your Liquor Marquis title and vast funds, we wouldn't have

been able to turn such a big profit so quickly.”

Vast funds? All I gave them was about twice as much as the amount of money they needed to start buying stock.

With my ridiculous wealth, that was practically pocket change.

“Liquor Marquis? I’ve scarcely heard the name before. Is it related to the Liquor Baron title from the Kingdom of Sorcery Lalagi?”

“That’s right. Liquor Marquis is a higher rank than Liquor Baron, comparable to a regular marquis in Lalagi. It’s like a magic title that makes almost all those awful tariffs disappear.”

Rayleigh bragged to his mother as if the title was his own.

Then he produced a jewelry box from the bag next to him and had a servant put it on the table.

“Tariff? It couldn’t be...”

“That’s right. It’s the Heaven’s Teardrop that the ladies of the royal capital love so much.”

Rayleigh grinned proudly as his mother opened the box and broke into a smile.

“Ooooooh, good heavens! How very beautiful!”

The viceroy’s wife wasn’t the only one to exclaim in surprise. The ladies-in-waiting around us clutched one another and shrieked their admiration.

It was such a far cry from the graceful demeanor they’d been displaying that I almost got whiplash.

I guess Heaven’s Teardrops were just that popular.

“This is truly splendid craftsmanship. You can see the patterns so clearly when you hold it up to the light.”

“Mother, I’d like to sell these in a salon in the royal capital. Do you think you could put in a word for me with Count Litton’s wife?”

“Yes, of course. Ema will be thrilled.”

As Rayleigh told me later, Ema Litton was Count Litton's wife, a close friend of the viceroy's wife, and particularly skilled at spreading information among the noblewomen of the royal capital.

"Still, I'm amazed you were able to come by such an incredible product. Perhaps you have a gift for trade?"

"I'd like to think so, but this is thanks to Sir Pendragon's influence, too. Since I was flying his noble flag, I was entrusted with bringing Prince Sabaan of the Kingdom of Ishrallie back to his homeland. Thanks to that connection, I was allowed to deal in Heaven's Teardrops."

"Then this isn't just a onetime situation, I hope?"

The viceroy's wife's eyes glittered.

"Of course—as long as I continue to fly Sir Pendragon's flag."

Rayleigh turned to me and winked.

Japanese people didn't really do that, though.

"Oh my, then I suppose we simply must treat Sir Pendragon as part of the family, hmm?"

The viceroy's wife smiled at me wolfishly.

As long as she didn't try to marry me off, I'd let them use my Liquor Marquis title as much as they liked.

"Mother, if you're thinking of marrying him into one of our collateral families, please don't."

"Oh? The main family line, then?"

"No, that's not what I mean. He's lovesick over a queen from a fairy land, so he isn't interested in any other marriage propositions right now."

"Lovesick"? It was a little embarrassing to hear him say that in front of other people.

"So just try to accommodate him normally, okay?"

"Accommodate him, you say? Sir Pendragon, you did have a request earlier, did you not?"

“Yes, to have the public orphanage rebuilt...”

I paused in the middle of my statement and looked up the number of homeless kids in the city.

There were more than I expected. A public orphanage alone wouldn't be able to take them all in.

“...and permission to start a private orphanage. I'd like to regularly distribute food, too, please.”

“You're asking for philanthropy over any personal business interests? Wow, you really are a nice guy. You even helped those folks you rescued from pirates find new work in Lalagi.”

Rayleigh stared at me in surprise.

It's not like I particularly enjoy volunteering or anything, though.

I just want to be able to enjoy life in Labyrinth City as carefreely as I possibly can.

I couldn't exactly walk around eating tasty food without feeling guilty if I was going to see kids starving in alleys along the way.

“Well, I'm certain we can grant those requests right away. The public orphanage existed until not too long ago, so we can just have it rebuilt.”

The viceroy's wife was quick to comply with my requests.

“Do you have a plot of land or building in mind for the private orphanage yet? If not, please have my butler help you—Bastian, set Sir Pendragon up with the proper real estate and materials.”

The latter part was directed toward a butler standing by the wall.

Between him and Sebafe, the butler in the old capital, I couldn't help wondering why these butlers came so close to the classic butler name without quite getting there.

Still, there were plenty of empty plots of land and houses around my mansion, so I could probably just have those repaired for the private orphanage.

Good thing I took the guild up on their offer to sell me all that land together.

When it came time to hire staff for the orphanage, I planned to have Viscount Siemmen, his noble friends, and the viceroy's wife help me find the right people.

Thus, our productive tea party came to an end, and Rayleigh walked me back to the entrance.

"If trade keeps up like this, we should be able to pay back your money within three years. In fact, I'd love to buy more ships if we can."

"I'll put in a request with a merchant I know, then. He just sent me a letter not too long ago that they'd received three new ships."

I gave Rayleigh the fictional merchant's name: Akindoh.

At some point, I'd have to befriend someone with the "Name Order" skill and add that alias to my name list in my networking tab.

"These are your dividends from our first trip. From now on, I'll send them to you via the money order system in the commerce guild."

As I accepted the heavy bag of money, I was surprised to learn that money orders existed in this world.

It made sense, though. There weren't many people with the "Item Box" skill, so carrying all this heavy gold around could probably get pretty difficult.



"Welcome home. Judging by your expression, I'm guessing it went well?"

When I returned to the house, Arisa greeted me from the garden, where she was showing the hired children how to weave grass into cords.

The little kids all welcomed me back with smiles, too.

"Yeah, I got permission to rebuild the public orphanage. The Shiga Kingdom is going to take care of all the budget and staffing for the public one, too. As for the private orphanage, they're going to put me in touch with some good craftsmen, and they're even going to add our area to the city guards' patrol route."

Now I could devote myself to crafting, exploring the labyrinth with the girls, and so on without having to worry about anything else.

“Wow, that’s amazing. What kind of spell did you use?”

“It’s a bit of a long story. Let’s make some tea and I’ll tell you about it.”

I tasked Arisa with bringing in the rest of the group from their work.

The sandy breeze from the desert tousled my hair.

Looking up, I saw a beautiful full moon with not a cloud in the sky.

“What perfect weather.”

I hadn’t mentioned this because I didn’t want to undermine Princess Meetia, but one of my cure-alls or elixirs could probably have cured the viceroy’s daughter.

For now, they had Princess Meetia’s Breath of Purification to keep the illness at bay, so I would investigate a bit more before offering my own medicine.

I wanted to use the basement laboratory of the Ivy Manor to make magic items from the materials we got in the labyrinth anyway, and now I finally had the time to do all of that.

The main purpose of our trip to Labyrinth City, raising everyone’s levels, would probably be accomplished within the next month or two.

This city didn’t seem to have much discrimination against demi-humans, so we could stay here while I worked on my new goal: making original armor, with the help of Arisa and Mia, that could stand up against the likes of a greater hell demon.

“Now all we have to do is relax and enjoy living in the labyrinth.”

I waved at Arisa and the others as they came running toward me and smiled to myself as I thought about our pleasant prospects for the future.

Time for another day of enjoying life in another world!

Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you for picking up the tenth volume of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

That's right, tenth! We're in the double digits now!

I never imagined we'd get to this point when I was writing the first volume, so I'm really emotional about it.

Considering all these feelings, I'd love to talk about the progress of work on the anime adaptation now, but since I'm writing this afterword in the early stages, I'm afraid there's no further news just yet. I'm sorry.

There might be more information by the time this volume comes out, so if you're interested, please check the official *Death March* page on the Kadokawa Books site for updates.

Now, let's discuss the major selling points of this volume, in the hopes that you'll carry it right to the register.

Compared with the previous volume, which was entirely new content, and the volumes before it, this one is relatively low on new episodes.

Before you accuse me of cutting corners, the truth is that working on this volume took far more time and effort than the one before it, so please don't worry.

I'm rather fond of the writing and organization of the Labyrinth City arc in the web version, so I tried to preserve the best parts about it while adding a new main storyline into the mix.

The spotlight is on this volume's guest heroine, Princess Meetia (or the "thee-thou" princess), as well as Satou and company's easygoing process of setting up a new base in Labyrinth City.

Of course, there are plenty of new scenes that weren't in the web version: more of Satou and friends in the labyrinth, labyrinth cuisine taste-testing scenes, and plenty of unexpected new acts from Satou himself.

I'd like to talk about it more, but I don't have many pages left this time, so let's wrap up the discussion of Volume 10's contents here.

Finally, the usual thank-yous! To my new editor A, as well as shri, everyone else who was involved in the development and sale of this book, and of course all of you readers who've supported the series! Thank you so much for reading all the way to the end of this book!

Let's meet again in the next volume for the Labyrinth City arc part two!

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10!
DEATH MARCH Rhapsody
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